Mrs. Bindle

Some Episodes from the Domestic Life of the Bindles by Herbert Jenkins

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37 Ballygunge Pa
Calcutta.

MRS BINDLE

SOME INCIDENTS FROM THE
DOMESTIC LIFE OF THE BINDLES

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

Ever since the success achieved by *Bindle*, Herbert Jenkins has been urged to write giving Mrs. Bindle's point of view. This book is the result.

Among other things, it narrates how Mrs. Bindle caught a chill, how a nephew was born to her and what effect it had upon her outlook.

It tells how she encountered a bull, and what happened to the man who endeavoured to take forcible possession of her home.

She is shown as breaking a strike by precipitating a lock-out, burning incense to her brother-in-law, Mr. Hearty, and refusing the armistice that was offered.

One chapter tells of her relations with her neighbours. Another deals with a musical evening she planned, and yet a third of how she caught a chill and was in great fear of heaven.

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MRS BINDLE

SOME INCIDENTS FROM THE DOMESTIC LIFE OF THE BINDLES

BY
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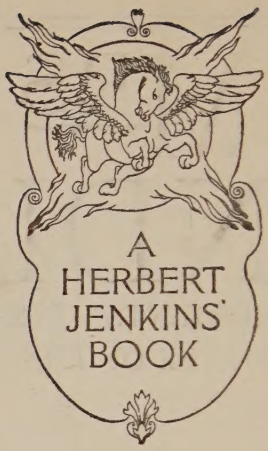

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TO
ARTHUR
COMPTON
RICKETT
M.A., LL.D.

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MRS BINDLE

CHAPTER I

MRS. BINDLE'S LOCK-OUT

I

"WELL! What's the matter now? Lorst your job?"

With one hand resting upon the edge of the pail beside which she was kneeling, Mrs. Bindle looked up, challenge in her eyes. Bindle's unexpected appearance while she was washing the kitchen oilcloth filled her with foreboding.

"There's a strike on at the yard," he replied in a tone which, in spite of his endeavour to render it casual, sounded like a confession of guilt. He knew Mrs. Bindle; he knew also her views on strikes.

"A what?" she cried, rising to her feet and wiping her hands upon the coarse canvas apron that covered the skirt carefully festooned about her hips. "A what?"

"A strike," repeated Bindle. "They give Walter 'Odson the sack, so we all come out."

"Oh! you have, have you?" she cried, her thin lips disappearing ominously. "And when are you going back, I'd like to know?" She regarded him with an eye that he knew meant war.

"Can't say," he replied, as he proceeded to fill his pipe from a tin tobacco-box. "Depends on the Union," he added.

"The Union!" she cried with rising wrath. "I wish I had them here. I'd give them Union, throwing men out of work, with food the price it is. What's going to 'appen to us? Can you tell me that?" she demanded, her diction becoming a little frayed at the edges, owing to the intensity of her feelings.

Bindle remained silent. He realised that he was faced by a crisis.

"Nice thing you coming 'ome at eleven o'clock in the morning calmly saying you've struck," she continued angrily. "You're a lazy, good-for-nothing set of loafers, the whole lot of you, that's what you are. When you're tired of work and want a 'oliday you strike, and spend your time in public-'ouses, betting and drinking and swearing, and us women slaving morning, noon and night to keep you. Suppose I was to strike, what then?"

She undid her canvas apron, and with short, jerky movements proceeded to fold and place it in the dresser-drawer. She then let down the festoons into which her skirt had been gathered about her inconspicuous hips.

Mrs. Bindle was a sharp, hatchet-faced woman, with eyes too closely set together to satisfy an artist.

The narrowness of her head was emphasised by the way in which her thin, sandy hair was drawn behind each ear and screwed tightly into a knot at the back.

Her lips were thin and slightly marked, and when she was annoyed they had a tendency to disappear altogether.

"How are we going to live?" she demanded. "Answer me that! You and your strikes!"

Bindle struck a match and became absorbed in lighting his pipe.

"What are you going to do for food?" She was not to be denied.

"We're a-goin' to get strike pay," he countered, seizing the opening.

"Strike pay!" she cried scornfully. "A fat lot of good that'll do. A pound a week, I suppose, and you eating like a—like a——" she paused for a satisfactory simile. "Eating me out of 'ouse and 'ome," she amended. "'Strike pay!' I'd give 'em strike pay if I had my way."

"It'll 'elp," suggested Bindle.

"Help! Yes, it'll help you to find out how hungry you can get," she retorted grimly. "I'd like to have that man Smillie here, I'd give him a bit of my mind."

"But 'e ain't done it," protested Bindle, a sense of fair play prompting him to defend the absent leader. "'E's a miner. We don't belong to 'is Union."

"They're all tarred with the same brush," cried

Mrs. Bindle, "a good-for-nothing, lazy lot. They turn you round their little fingers, and then laugh at you up their sleeves. I know them," she added darkly.

Bindle edged towards the door. He had not been in favour of the strike; now it was even less popular with him.

"I suppose you're going round to your low public-house, to drink and smoke and tell each other how clever you've been," she continued. "Then you'll come back expecting to find your dinner ready to put in your mouth."

Mrs. Bindle's words were prophetic. Bindle *was* going round to The Yellow Ostrich to meet his mates, and discuss the latest strike-news.

"You wouldn't 'ave me a blackleg, Lizzie, would you?" he asked.

"Don't talk to me about such things," she retorted "I'm a hardworking woman, I am, inchin' and pinchin' to keep the home respectable, while you and your low companions refuse to work. I wish I had them all here, I'd give them strikes." Her voice shook with suppressed passion.

Realising that the fates were against him, Bindle beat a gloomy retreat, and turned his steps in the direction of The Yellow Ostrich.

At one o'clock he returned to Fenton Street, a little doubtful; but very hungry.

He closed the gate quietly, Mrs. Bindle hated the banging of gates. Suddenly he caught sight of a piece of white paper pinned to the front door. A moment

later he was reading the dumbfounding announcement :

"I have struck too.

"E. BINDLE."

The words, which were written on the back of a coal-merchant's advertisement, seemed to dance before his eyes.

He was conscious that at the front window on either side a face was watching him intently. In Fenton Street drama was the common property of all.

With a puzzled expression in his eyes, Bindle stood staring at the piece of paper and its ominous message, his right hand scratching his head through the blue and white cricket cap he habitually wore.

"Well, I'm blowed," he muttered, as Mrs. Grimps, who lived at No. 5, came to her door and stood regarding him not unsympathetically.

At the sight of her neighbour, Mrs. Sawney, who occupied No. 9, also appeared, her hands rolled up in her apron and her arms steaming. She had been engaged in the scullery when "'Arriet," who had been set to watch events, rushed in from the front room with the news that Mr. Bindle was coming.

"Serves you right, it does," said Mrs. Sawney. "You men," she added, as if to remove from her words any suggestion that they were intended as personal. Bindle was very popular with his neighbours.

"Strikes you does, when you ain't feeling like work," chorused Mrs. Grimps, "I know you."

Bindle looked from one to the other. For once he felt there was nothing to say.

"Then there's the kids," said a slatternly-looking woman with a hard mouth and dusty hair, who had just drifted up from two doors away. "A lot you cares. It's us wot 'as to suffer."

There was a murmur from the other women, who had been reinforced by two neighbours from the opposite side of the street.

"She 'as my sympathy," said Mrs. Sawney, "although I can't say I likes 'er as a friend."

During these remarks, Bindle had been searching for his latch-key, which he now drew forth and inserted in the lock; but, although the latch responded, the door did not give. It was bolted on the inside.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered again, too surprised at this new phase of the situation to be more than dimly conscious of the remarks of those about him.

"My sister's man struck three months ago," said one of the new arrivals, "and 'er expectin' 'er fifth. Crool I calls it. They ought to 'ave 'em theirselves is wot I say. That'ud learn 'em to strike."

A murmur of approval broke from the others at this enigmatical utterance.

"It's all very well for them," cried Mrs. Sawney; "but it's us wot 'as to suffer, us and the pore kids, bless 'em. 'Arriet, you let me catch you swingin' on that gate again, my beauty, and I'll skin you."

The last remark was directed at the little girl, who

had seized the moment of her mother's pre-occupation to indulge herself in an illicit joy.

Without a word, Bindle turned and walked down the flagged path to the gate, and along Fenton Street in the direction of The Yellow Ostrich, leaving behind him a group of interested women, who would find in his tragedy material for a week's gossip.

His customary cheeriness had forsaken him. He realised that he was faced by a domestic crisis that frankly puzzled him—and he was hungry.

As he pushed open the hospitable swing-door of The Yellow Ostrich, he was greeted by a new and even more bewildering phase of the situation.

"'Ere, Bindle," cried an angry voice, "wot the blinkin' 'ell's your missis up to?"

"You may search me," was Bindle's lugubrious reply, as he moved across to the bar and ordered a pint of beer, some bread, and "a bit o' the cheese wot works the lift."

"You was agin us chaps striking," continued the speaker who had greeted Bindle on his entrance, a man with a criminal forehead, a loose mouth, and a dirty neckcloth.

"Wot's your complaint, mate?" enquired Bindle indifferently, as he lifted his pewter from the counter, and took a pull that half emptied it of its contents.

"Wot's your ruddy missis been up to?" demanded the man aggressively.

"Look 'ere, 'Enery, ole sport," said Bindle quietly, as he wiped his lips with the back of his hand, "you ain't pretty, an' you ain't good; but try an' keep

yer mouth clean when you speaks of Mrs. B. See ? "

A murmur of approval rose from the other men, with whom Bindle was popular and Henry Gilkes was not.

" Wot's she mean a-goin' round to my missis an' gettin' 'er to bolt me out ? "

" Bolt you out ! " cried Bindle, with a puzzled expression. " Wotjer talkin' about ? "

" When I goes 'ome to dinner," was the angry retort, " there's a ticket on the blinkin' door sayin' my missis 'as struck. I'll strike 'er ! " he added malevolently. " The lady next door tells me that it's your missis wot done it."

For a moment Bindle gazed at his fellow-sufferer, then he smacked his thigh with the air of a man who has just seen a great joke, which for some time has evaded him.

" 'Enery," he grinned, " she's done it to me too."

" Done wot ? " enquired Henry, who, as a Father of the Chapel, felt he was a man of some importance.

" Locked me out, back *and* front," explained Bindle, enjoying his mate's bewilderment. " Wot about the solidarity of labour now, ole sport ? " he enquired.

Henry Gilkes had one topic of conversation—" the solidarity of labour." Those who worked with him found it wearisome listening to his views on the bloated capitalist, and how he was to be overcome. They preferred discussing their own betting ventures, and the prospects of the Chelsea and Fulham football teams.

" Done it to you ! " repeated Gilkes dully. " Wot she done ? "

"I jest nipped round to get a bit o' dinner," explained Bindle, "and there was both doors bolted, an' a note a-sayin' that Mrs. B. 'ad struck. Personally, myself, I calls it a lock-out," he added with a grin.

Several of his hearers began to manifest signs of uneasiness. They had not been home since early morning.

"I'll break 'er stutterin' jaw if my missis locks me out," growled a heavily-bearded man, known as "Ruddy Bill" on account of the intensity of his language.

"Jest the sort o' thing you would do," said Bindle genially. "You got a sweet nature, Bill, in spite of them whiskers."

Ruddy Bill growled something in his beard, while several of the other men drained their pewters and slipped out, intent on discovering whether or no their own domestic bliss were threatened by this new and unexpected danger.

From then on, the public bar of The Yellow Ostrich hummed with angry talk and threats of what would happen if the lords, who there gloried and drank deep, should return to their hearths and find manifestations of rebellion.

Two of the men, who had gone to investigate the state of their own domestic barometers, were back in half an hour with the news that they too had been locked out from home and beauty.

About three o'clock, Ruddy Bill returned, streams of profanity flowing from his lips. Finding himself bolted out, he had broken open the door; but no

one was there. Now he was faced with a threat of ejectment from the landlord, who had heard of the wilful damage to his property, plus the cost of a new door.

Several times that afternoon the landlord of The Yellow Ostrich, himself regarded as an epicure in the matter of "language," found it necessary to utter the stereotyped phrase, "Now gents, if *you* please," which, with him, meant that the talk was becoming unfit for the fo'c'sle of a tramp steamer.

II

Left to herself by the departure of Bindle for The Yellow Ostrich, Mrs. Bindle had, for some time, stood by the dresser deep in thought. She had then wrung-out the house-flannel, emptied the pail, placed them under the sink and once more returned to the dresser. Five minutes' meditation was followed by swift action.

First she took her bonnet from the dresser-drawer, then unhooking a dark brown mackintosh from behind the door, she proceeded to make her outdoor toilet in front of the looking-glass on the mantelpiece.

She then sought out ink-bottle and pen, and wrote her defiance with an ink-eaten nib. This accomplished, she bolted the front-door on the inside, first attaching her strike-notice. Leaving the house by the door

giving access to the scullery, she locked it, taking the key with her.

Her face was grim and her walk was determined, as she made her way to the yard at which Bindle was employed. There she demanded to see the manager and, after some difficulty, was admitted.

She began by reproaching him and ordering him to stop the strike. When, however, he had explained that the strike was entirely due to the action of the men, she ended by telling him of her own drastic action, and her determination to continue her strike until the men went back.

The manager surprised her by leaning back in his chair and laughing uproariously.

"Mrs. Bindle," he cried at length, as he wiped the tears from his eyes, "you're a genius; but I'm sorry for Bindle. Now, do you want to end the strike in a few hours?"

Mrs. Bindle looked at him suspiciously; but, conscious of the very obvious admiration with which he regarded her act, she relented sufficiently to listen to what he had to say.

Ten minutes later she left the office with a list of the names and addresses of the strikers, including that of the branch organising secretary of the Union. She had decided upon a counter-offensive.

Her first call was upon Mrs. Gilkes, a quiet little woman who had been subdued to meekness by the "solidarity of labour." Here she had to admit failure.

"I know what you mean, my dear," said Mrs.

Gilkes; "but you see, Mr. Gilkes wouldn't like it." There was a tremor of fear in her voice.

"Wouldn't like it!" echoed Mrs. Bindle. "Of course he wouldn't like it. Bindle won't like it when he knows," her jaws met grimly and her lips disappeared. "You're afraid," she added accusingly.

"That's it, my dear, I am," was the disconcerting reply. "I never 'ad no 'eart for a fight, that's why Mr. Gilkes 'as come it over me like 'e 'as. My sister, Mary, was sayin' only last Toosday—no it wasn't, it was We'n'sday, I remember because it was the day we 'ad sausages wot Mr. Gilkes said wasn't fresh. 'Amelia,' she says, 'you ain't got the 'eart of a rabbit, or else you wouldn't stand wot you do,'" and, looking up into Mrs. Bindle's face, she added, "It's true, Mrs. Gimble, although I didn't own it to Mary, 'er bein' my sister an' so uppish in 'er ways."

"Well, you'll be sorry," was Mrs. Bindle's comment, as she turned towards the door. "I'll be no man's slave."

"You see, I 'aven't the 'eart, Mrs. Gimber."

"Bindle!" snapped Mrs. Bindle over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Spindle, my mistake."

Mrs. Bindle stalked along the passage, through the front door and out of the gate, leaving Mrs. Gilkes murmuring deprecatingly that she "'adn't no 'eart for a fight."

Although she would not own it, Mrs. Bindle was discouraged by the failure of her first attempt at strike-breaking. But for her good-fortune in encountering Mrs. Hopton at her second venture,

she might even have relinquished the part of Lysistrata and have returned home to prepare Bindle's dinner.

It was with something like misgiving that she knocked at No. 32 Wessels Street. This feeling was accentuated when the door was opened with great suddenness by an enormously big woman with a square chin, fighting eyes, and very little hair.

With arms akimbo, one elbow touching either side of the passage, as if imbued with the sentiments of Horatius Cocles, Mrs. Hopton stood with tightly-shut mouth regarding her caller. As soon as Mrs. Bindle had made her mission known, however, Mrs. Hopton's manner underwent an entire change. Her hands dropped from her hips, her fixed expression relaxed, and she stood invitingly aside.

"I'm your woman," she cried. "You come in, Mrs.——"

"Bindle!" prompted Mrs. Bindle.

"You come in, Mrs. Bindle, you got the woman you want in Martha 'Opton. Us women 'ave stood this sort of thing long enough. I've always said so."

She led the way into an airless little parlour, in which a case of wax-fruit, a dusty stuffed dog and a clothes-horse hung with the familiarities of Mrs. Hopton's laundry, first struck the eye.

"I've always said," continued Mrs. Hopton, "that us women was too meek and mild by half in the way we takes things. My man's a fool," she added with conviction. "'E's that easily led by them arbitrators, that's wot I call 'em, that they makes 'im do just

wotever they wants, dirty, lazy set o' tykes. Never done a day's work in their lives, they 'aven't, not one of 'em."

"That's what I say," cried Mrs. Bindle, for once in her life finding a congenial spirit outside the walls of the Alton Road Chapel. "I've locked up my house," she continued, "and put a note on the door that I've struck too."

The effect of these words upon Mrs. Hopton was startling. Her head went back like that of a chicken drinking, her hands rose once more to her hips, and her huge frame shook and pulsated as if it contained a high-power motor-engine. Mrs. Bindle gazed at her with widened eyes.

"Her-her-her!" came in deep, liquid gutturals from Mrs. Hopton's lips. "Her-her-her!" Then her head came down again, and Mrs. Bindle saw that the grim lips were parted, displaying some very yellow, unprepossessing teeth. Mrs. Hopton was manifesting amusement.

Without further comment, Mrs. Hopton left the room. In her absence, Mrs. Bindle proceeded to sum-up her character from the evidence that her home contained. The result was unfavourable. She had just decided that her hostess was dirty and untidy, without sense of decency or religion, when Mrs. Hopton re-entered. In one hand she carried a piece of paper, in the other a small ink-bottle, out of which an orange-coloured pen-holder reared its fluted length.

Clearing a space on the untidy table, she bent down and, with squared elbows and cramped fingers,

proceeded to scrawl the words: "I have struck too. M. Hopton."

Then, straightening herself, she once more threw back her head, and another stream of "Her-her-her's" gushed towards the ceiling.

"Now I'll come with you," she said at length. Without waiting to don cloak or bonnet, she proceeded to pin the notice on the front door, which she bolted on the inside. She then left by the scullery door, locking it, just as Mrs. Bindle had done, and carrying with her the key.

Although Mrs. Bindle felt that she suffered socially from being seen with the lumbering, untidy Mrs. Hopton, she regarded it as a sacrifice to a just cause. It was not long, however, before she discovered that she had recruited, not a lieutenant, but a leader.

Seizing the list of names and addresses from her companion's hand, Mrs. Hopton glanced at it and turned in the direction of the street in which lived the timid Mrs. Gilkes. As they walked, Mrs. Bindle told the story of Mrs. Gilkes's cowardice, drawing from the Amazon-like Mrs. Hopton the significant words "Leave 'er to me."

"Now then, none of this," was her greeting to Mrs. Gilkes as she opened her front door. "Out you comes and joins the strike-breakers. None o' your nonsense or——" she paused significantly.

Mrs. Gilkes protested her cowardice, she grovelled, she dragged in her sister, Mary, and the wrathful Gilkes; but without avail. Almost before she knew what had happened, she was walking between Mrs.

Hopton and Mrs. Bindle, the back-door key clasped in one hand, striving to tie the strings of her bonnet beneath a chin that was obviously too shallow for the purpose. In her heart was a great terror; yet she was conscious of a strange and not unpleasant thrill at the thought of her own daring. She comforted herself with Mrs. Hopton's promise of protection against her lord's anger.

The overpowering personality of Mrs. Hopton was too much for the other wives. The one or two who made a valiant endeavour to stand out were overwhelmed by her ponderous ridicule, which bordered upon intimidation.

"'Ere, get a pen an' ink," she would cry and, before the reluctant housewife knew what had happened, she had announced that she too had struck, and Mrs. Hopton's army had been swelled by another recruit.

At one house they found the husband about to sit down to an early dinner. That gave Mrs. Hopton her chance.

"You lazy, guzzling, good-for-nothing son of a God-damn loafer!" she shouted, her deep voice throbbing with passion. "Call yourself a man? Fine sort of man you are, letting your wife work and slave while you strike and fill your belly with beef and beer. I've seen better things than you thrown down the sink, that I 'ave."

At the first attack, the man had risen from the table in bewilderment. As Mrs. Hopton emptied upon him the vials of her anger, he had slowly retreated towards the scullery door. She made a sudden move-

ment in his direction ; he turned—wrenched open the door, and fled.

" I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mrs.—— "

" Bolton," said the neat little woman.

" I'm sorry, Mrs. Bolton," said Mrs. Hopton ; " but we're going to break this 'ere strike, me and Mrs. Bindle and all these other ladies." She waved her hand to indicate the army she had already collected.

Then she went on to explain ; but Mrs. Bolton was adamant against all her invitations to join the emancipationists.

" I suppose we got to fight your battle," Mrs. Hopton cried, and proceeded to drench her victim with ridicule ; but Mrs. Bolton stood fast, and the strike-breakers had to acknowledge defeat.

It was Mrs. Bindle's idea that they should hold a meeting outside the organising secretary's house. The suggestion was acclaimed with enthusiasm.

" Let's get a tidy few, first," counselled Mrs. Hopton. " It'll make 'im think 'arder."

At the end of an hour, even Mrs. Hopton was satisfied with the number of her supporters, and she gave the word for the opening of hostilities.

That afternoon, just as he was rising from an excellent meal, Mr. James Cunham was surprised to find that his neatly-kept front-garden was filled with women, while more women seemed to occupy the street. Neighbours came out, errand-boys called to friends, that they might not miss the episode, children paused on their way to school ; all seemed to realise the dramatic possibilities of the situation.

Mrs. Hopton played a fugue upon Mr. Cunham's knocker, bringing him to the door in person.

"Well, monkey-face," she boomed. There was a scream of laughter from her followers.

Mr. Cunham started back as if he had been struck.

"Want to starve us, do you?" continued Mrs. Hopton.

"What's all this about?" he enquired, recovering himself. He was a man accustomed to handling crowds, even unfriendly crowds; but never had he encountered anything like the cataract of wrathful contumely that now poured from Mrs. Hopton's lips.

"Just 'ad a good dinner, I suppose," she cried scornfully. "Been enjoyin' it, eh? Cut from the joint and two vegs, puddin' to follow, with a glass of stout to wash it down. That the meenyou, eh? What does it cost you when our men strike? Do you 'ave to keep 'alf a dozen bellies full on a pound a week?"

There was a murmur from the women behind her, a murmur that Mr. Cunham did not like.

"Nice little 'ouse you got 'ere," continued Mrs. Hopton critically, as she peered into the neat and well-furnished hall. "All got out o' strikes," she added over her shoulder to her companions. "All got on the do-nothin'-at-all-easy-purchase-system."

This time there was no mistaking the menace in the murmur from the women behind her.

"You're a beauty, you are," continued Mrs. Hopton. "Not much sweat about your lily brow, Mr. Funny Cunham."

Mr. Cunham felt that the time had come for action.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Why have you come here, and who are you?"

"Who are we?" cried Mrs. Hopton scornfully. "He asks who we are," she threw over her shoulder.

Again there was an angry murmur from the rank and file.

"We're the silly fools wot married the men you brought out on strike," said Mrs. Hopton, looking the organising secretary up and down as if he were on show. "Creases in 'is trousers, too," she cried. "You ain't 'alf a swell. Well, we just come to tell you that the strike's orf, because we've struck. Get me, Steve?"

"We've declared a lock-out," broke in Mrs. Bindle with inspiration.

Back went Mrs. Hopton's head, up went her hands to her hips, and deep-throated "Her-her-her's" poured from her parted lips.

"A lock-out!" she cried. "Her-her-her, a lock-out! That's the stuff to give 'em!" and the rank and file took up the cry and, out of the plenitude of his experience, Mr. Cunham recognised that the crowd was hopelessly out of hand.

"Are we downhearted?" cried a voice, and the shrieks of "No!" that followed confirmed Mr. Cunham in his opinion that the situation was not without its serious aspect.

He was not a coward and he stood his ground, listening to Mrs. Hopton's inspiring oratory of denunciation.

It was three o'clock before he saw his garden again—a trampled waste ; an offering to the Moloch of strikes.

" Damn the woman ! " he cried, as, shutting the door, he returned to the room he used as an office, there to deliberate upon this new phase of the situation. " Curse her ! "

III

It was nearly half-past ten that night when Bindle tip-toed up the tiled-path leading to the front door of No. 7 Fenton Street.

Softly he inserted his key in the lock and turned it ; but the door refused to give. He stepped back to gaze up at the bedroom window ; there was no sign of a light.

It suddenly struck him that the piece of paper on the door was not the same in shape as that he had seen at dinner-time. It was too dark to see if there was anything written on it. Taking a box of matches from his pocket, he struck a light, shielding it carefully so that it should shine only on the paper.

His astonishment at what he read caused him to forget the lighted match, which burnt his fingers.

" Well, I'm blowed ! " he muttered. " If this ain't It," and once more he read the sinister notice :

" You have struck. We women have declared a lock-out.

" E. Bindle."

After a few minutes' cogitation, he tip-toed down the path and round to the back of the house; but the scullery door was inflexible in its inhospitality.

He next examined the windows. Each was securely fastened.

"Where'm I goin' to sleep?" he muttered, as once more he tip-toed up the path.

After a further long deliberation, he lifted the knocker, gave three gentle taps—and waited. As nothing happened, he tried four taps of greater strength. These, in turn, produced no response. Then he gave a knock suggestive of a telegraph boy, or a registered letter. At each fresh effort he stepped back to get a view of the bedroom window.

He fancied that the postman-cum-telegraph-boy's knock had produced a slight fluttering of the curtain. He followed it up with something that might have been the police, or a fire.

As he stepped back, the bedroom-window was thrown up, and Mrs. Bindle's head appeared.

"What's the matter?" she cried.

"I can't get in," said Bindle.

"I know you can't," was the uncompromising response, "and I don't mean you shall."

"But where'm I goin' to sleep?" he demanded, anxiety in his voice.

"That's for you to settle."

"'Ere, Lizzie, come down an' let me in," he cried, falling to cajolery.

For answer Mrs. Bindle banged-to the window. He waited expectantly for the door to be opened.

At the end of five minutes he realised that Mrs. Bindle had probably gone back to bed.

"Well, I can't stay 'ere all the bloomin' night, me with various veins in my legs," he muttered, conscious that from several windows interested heads were thrust.

Fully convinced that Mrs. Bindle was not on her way down to admit him, he once more fell back upon the knocker, awakening the echoes of Fenton Street.

At the sound of the window-sash being raised, he stepped back and looked up eagerly.

"'Ere, wot the ——!"

Something seemed to flash through the night, and he received the contents of the ewer full in the face.

"That'll teach you to come waking me up at this time of night," came the voice of Mrs. Bindle, who, a moment later, retreated into the room. Bindle, rightly conjecturing that she had gone for more water, retired out of reach.

"You soaked me through to the skin," he cried, when she re-appeared.

"And serve you right, too, you and your strikes."

"But ain't you goin' to let me in?"

"When the strike's off the lock-out'll cease," was the oracular retort.

"But I didn't want to strike," protested Bindle.

"Then you should have been a man and said so, instead of letting that little rat make you do everything he wants, him sitting down to a good dinner every day, all paid for out of strikes."

There were sympathetic murmurs from the surrounding darkness.

"But——" began Bindle.

"Don't let me 'ear anything more of you to-night, Joe Bindle," came Mrs. Bindle's uncompromising voice, "or next time I'll throw the jug an' all at you," and with that she banged-to the window in a way that convinced Bindle it was useless to parley further.

"Catch my death o' cold," he grumbled, as he turned on a reluctant heel in the direction of Fulham High Street, with the intention of claiming hospitality from his sister-in-law, Mrs. Hearty. "Wot am I goin' to do for duds," he added. "Funny ole bird I should look in one of 'Earty's frock-coats."

IV

The next morning at nine o'clock, the wives of the strikers met by arrangement outside the organising secretary's house; but the strikers themselves were before them, and Mr. Cunham found himself faced with the ugliest situation he had ever encountered.

At the sight of the groups of strikers, the women raised shrill cries. The men, too, lifted their voices, not in derision or criticism of their helpmates; but at the organising secretary.

The previous night the same drama that had been enacted between Bindle and Mrs. Bindle had taken place outside the houses of many of the other strikers,

with the result that they had become " fed up to the blinkin' neck with the whole ruddy business."

" Well ! " cried Mrs. Hopton as, at the head of her legion of Amazons, she reached the first group of men. " How jer like it ? "

The men turned aside, grumbling in their throats.

" Her-her-her ! " she laughed. " Boot's on the other foot now, my pretty canaries, ain't it ? Nobody mustn't do anythink to upset you ; but you can do what you streamin' well like, you lot o' silly mugs !

" Wotjer let that little rat-faced sniveller turn you round 'is little finger for ? You ain't men, you're just Unionists wot 'ave got to do wot 'e tells you. I see 'im yesterday," she continued after a slight pause, " 'aving a rare ole guzzle wot you pays for by striking. 'Ow much does it cost 'im ? That's wot I want to know, the rat-faced little stinker ! "

At that moment " the rat-faced little stinker " himself appeared, hat on head and light overcoat thrown over his arm. He smiled wearily, he was not favourably impressed by the look of things.

His appearance was the signal for shrill shouts from the women, and a grumbling murmur from the men.

" 'Ere's Kayser Cunham," shouted one woman, and then individual cries were drowned in the angry murmur of protest and recrimination.

Mr. Cunham found himself faced by the same men who, the day before, had greeted his words with cheers. Now they made it manifest that if he did not find a way out of the strike difficulty, there would be trouble.

"Take that!" roared Mrs. Hopton hoarsely, as she snatched something from a paper-bag she was carrying, and hurled it with all her might at the leader. Her aim was bad, and a small man, standing at right angles to the Union secretary, received a large and painfully ripe tomato full on the chin.

Mrs. Hopton's cry was a signal to the other women. From beneath cloaks and capes they produced every conceivable missile, including a number of eggs far gone towards chickenhood. With more zeal than accuracy of aim, they hurled them at the unfortunate Mr. Cunham. For a full minute he stood his ground valiantly, then, an egg catching him between the eyes brought swift oblivion.

The strikers, however, did not manifest the courage of their leader. Although intended for the organising secretary, most of the missiles found a way into their ranks. They wavered and, a moment after, turned and fled.

Approaching nearer, the women concentrated upon him whom they regarded as responsible for the strike, and their aim improved. Some of their shots took effect on his person, but most of them on the front of the house. Three windows were broken, and it was not until Mrs. Cunham came and dragged her egg-bespattered lord into the passage, banging-to the street door behind her, that the storm began to die down.

By this time a considerable crowd of interested spectators had gathered.

"Just shows you what us women can do if we've a

mind to do it," was the oracular utterance of one woman, who prided herself upon having been the first arrival outside the actual combatants.

"She ain't 'alf a caution," remarked a "lady friend," who had joined her soon after the outbreak of hostilities. "That big un," she added, nodding in the direction of Mrs. Hopton, who, arms on hips and head thrown back, was giving vent to her mirth in a series of "her-her-her's."

A policeman pushed his way through the crowd towards the gate. Mrs. Hopton, catching sight of him, turned.

"You take my advice, my lad, and keep out of this."

The policeman looked about him a little uncertainly.

"What's the matter?" he enquired.

"It's a strike and a lock-out," she explained, "an' they got a bit mixed. We ain't got no quarrel with a good-looking young chap like you, an' we're on private premises, so you just jazz along as if you 'adn't seen us."

A smile fluttered about the lips of the policeman. The thought of passing Mrs. Hopton without seeing her amused him; still he took no active part in the proceedings, beyond an official exhortation to the crowd to "pass along, please."

"Well, ladies," said Mrs. Hopton, addressing her victorious legions; "it's all over now, bar shoutin'. If any o' your men start a-knockin' you about, tell 'em we're a-goin' to stand together, and just let me

know. We'll come round and make 'em wish they'd been born somethink wot can't feel."

That morning the manager at the yard received a deputation from the men, headed by Mr. Cunham, who, although he had changed his clothes and taken a hot bath, was still conscious of the disgusting reek of rotten eggs. Before dinner-time the whole matter had been settled, and the men were to resume work at two o'clock.

Bindle reached home a few minutes to one, hungry and expectant. The notice had been removed from the front door, and he found Mrs. Bindle in the kitchen ironing.

"Well," she demanded as he entered, "what do you want?"

"Strike's orf, Lizzie," he said genially, an anxious eye turned to the stove upon which, however, there were no saucepans. This decided him that his dinner was in the oven.

"I could have told you that!" was her sole comment, and she proceeded with her ironing.

For a few minutes Bindle looked about him, then once more fixed his gaze upon the oven.

"Wot time you goin' to 'ave dinner, Lizzie?" he asked, with all the geniality of a prodigal doubtful of his welcome.

"I've had it." Mrs. Bindle's lips met in a hard, firm line.

"Is mine in the oven?"

"Better look and see."

He walked across to the stove and opened the

oven door. It was as bare as the cupboard of Mrs. Hubbard.

"Wot you done with it, Lizzie?" he enquired, misgiving clutching at his heart.

"What have I done with what?" she snapped, as she brought her iron down with a bang that caused him to jump.

"My little bit o' groundsel."

"When you talk sense, perhaps I can understand you."

"My dinner," he explained with an injured air.

"When you've done a day's work you'll get a day's dinner, and not before."

"But the strike's orf."

"So's the lock-out."

"But——"

"Don't stand there 'butting' me. Go and do some work, then you'll have something to eat," and Mrs. Bindle reversed the pillow-case she was ironing, and got in a straight right full in the centre of it, whilst Bindle turned gloomily to the door and made his way to The Yellow Ostrich, where, over a pint of beer and some bread and cheese, he gloomed his discontent.

"No more strikes for me," said a man seated opposite, who was similarly engaged.

"Same 'ere," said Bindle.

"Bob Cunham got a flea in 'is ear this mornin' wot 'e's been askin' for," said the man, and Bindle, nodding in agreement, buried his face in his pewter.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Hopton was explaining to a few personal friends how it all had happened.

"She done good work in startin' of us orf," was her tribute to Mrs. Bindle; "but I can't say I takes to her as a friend."

CHAPTER II

MRS. BINDLE'S WASHING-DAY

I

SHOOOOOOOOSSSSH!

Like a silver flash, the contents of a water-jug descended upon the back of the moth-eaten sandy cat, engaged in excavating Mrs. Bindle's geranium-bed.

A curve of yellow, and Mrs. Sawney's "Sandy" had taken the dividing wall between No. 7 and No. 9 in one movement—and the drama was over.

Mrs. Bindle closed her parlour-window. She refilled the jug, placing it ready for the next delinquent and then returned to her domestic duties.

On the other side of a thin partitioning wall, Mrs. Sawney left the window from which she had viewed her cat's attack upon Mrs. Bindle's geranium-bed, and Mrs. Bindle's counter-attack upon Sandy's person. Passing into the small passage she opened the front door, her lips set in a determined line.

"Sandy, Sandy, Sandy, Sandy," she called, in accents that caused Sandy, now three gardens away, to pause in the act of shaking his various members

one by one, in an endeavour to disembarrass himself of the contents of Mrs. Bindle's water-jug.

"Sandy, Sandy, Sandy, Sandy," cooed Mrs. Sawney. "Poor pussy."

The tone of his mistress' voice rendered Sandy suspicious as to her intentions. He was a cat who had fought his way from kittenhood to a three-year-old, and that with the loss of nothing more conspicuous than the tip of his left ear. He could not remember the time when he had not been engaged in warfare, either predatory or defensive, and he had accumulated much wisdom in the process.

"Sandy, Sandy, Sandy, Sandy. Puss, puss, puss." Mrs. Sawney's tone grew in mellowness as her anger increased. "Poor pussy."

With a final shake of his near hind leg, Sandy put two more gardens between himself and that voice, and proceeded to damn to-morrow's weather by washing clean over his right ear.

Mrs. Sawney closed her front-door and retired to the regions that knew her best. In her heart was a great anger. Water had been thrown over her cat, an act which, according to Mrs. Sawney's code of ethics, constituted a personal affront.

It was Monday, and with Mrs. Sawney the effect of the Monday-morning feeling, coupled with the purifying of the domestic linen, was a sore trial to her never very philosophical nature.

"To-morrow'll be *'er* washing-day," she muttered, as she poked down the clothes in the bubbling copper with a long stick, bleached and furred by constant

immersion in boiling water. "I'll show 'er, throwing water over my cat, the stuck-up baggage!"

Late that afternoon, she called upon Mrs. Grimps, who lived at No. 5, to return the scrubbing-board she had borrowed that morning. With Mrs. Sawney, to borrow was to manifest the qualities of neighbourliness, and one of her grievances against Mrs. Bindle was that she was "too stuck up to borrow a pin."

Had Sandy heard the sentiments that fell from his mistress's lips that afternoon, and had he not been the Ulysses among cats that he undoubtedly was, he would have become convinced that a new heaven or a new earth was in prospect. As it was, Sandy was two streets away, engaged in an affair with a lady of piebald appearance and coy demeanour.

When, half an hour later, Mrs. Sawney returned to No. 9, her expression was even more grim. The sight of the pink tie-ups with which the white lace curtains at No. 7 were looped back, rendered her forgetful of her recently expressed sentiments. She sent Sandy at express speed from her sight, and soundly boxed Harriet's ears. Mrs. Sawney was annoyed.

II

All her life Mrs. Bindle had been exclusive. She prided herself upon the fact that she was never to be seen gossiping upon doorstep, or at garden-gate. In

consequence, she was regarded as "a stuck-up cat"; she called it keeping herself to herself.

Another cause of her unpopularity with the housewives of Fenton Street was the way she stared at their windows as she passed. There was in that look criticism and disdain, and it inspired her neighbours with fury, the more so because of their impotence.

Mrs. Bindle judged a woman by her windows—and by the same token condemned her. Fenton Street knew it, and treasured up the memory.

It was this attitude towards their windows, more than Mrs. Bindle's exclusiveness in the matter of front-door, or back-door gossip, that made for her unpopularity with those among whom circumstances and the jerry-builder had ordained that she should spend her days. She regarded it as a virtue not to be on speaking terms with anyone in the street.

For the most part, Mrs. Bindle and her immediate neighbours lived in a state of armed neutrality. On the one side was Mrs. Sawney, a lath of a woman with an insatiable appetite for scandal and the mouth of a scold, whose windows were, in Mrs. Bindle's opinion, a disgrace; on the other was Mrs. Grimps, a big, jolly-looking woman, who laughed loudly at things, about which Mrs. Bindle did not even permit herself to think.

In spite of the armistice that prevailed, there were occasions when slumbering dislike would develop into open hostilities. The strategy employed was almost invariably the same, just as were the forces engaged.

These encounters generally took place on Tuesdays,

Mrs. Bindle's washing-day. To a woman, Fenton Street washed on Monday, and the fact of Mrs. Bindle selecting Tuesday for the cleansing her household linen was, in the eyes of other housewives, a direct challenge. It was an endeavour to vaunt her own superiority, and Fenton Street, despite its cockney good-nature, found it impossible to forgive what it regarded as "swank".

The result was that occasionally Fenton Street gave tongue, sometimes through the medium of its offspring; at others from the lips of the women themselves.

Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney had conceived a clever strategy, which never failed in its effect upon their victim. On Mrs. Bindle's washing-days, when hostilities had been decided on, Mrs. Grimps would go up to the back-bedroom window, whilst Mrs. Sawney would stand at her back-door, or conversely. From these positions, the fences being low, they had an excellent view of the back garden of No. 7, and would carry on a conversation, the subject of which would be Mrs. Bindle, or the garments she was exposing to the public gaze.

The two women seemed to find a never-ending source of interest in their neighbour's laundry. Being intensely refined in all such matters, Mrs. Bindle subjected her weekly wash to a strict censorship, drying the more intimate garments before the kitchen fire. This evoked frankly-expressed speculation between her two enemies as to how anyone could live without change of clothing.

In her heart, Mrs. Bindle had come to dislike, almost

to dread, washing-days, although she in no way mitigated her uncompromising attitude towards her neighbours.

When, on the Wednesday morning following one of these one-sided battles, Mrs. Bindle went out shopping, her glances at the front-windows of Mrs. Grimps's house, or those of Mrs. Sawney, according to the direction she took, were steadier and more critical than ever. Mrs. Bindle was not one to strike her flag to the enemy.

Soon after nine on the Tuesday morning after Sandy had constituted himself a casus belli, Mrs. Bindle emerged from her scullery carrying a basketful of steaming clothes, on the top of which lay a handful of clothes-pegs. Placing the basket on the ground, she proceeded to wipe with a cloth the clothes-line, which Bindle had put up before breakfast.

The sight of her neat, angular form in the garden was the signal for Mrs. Grimps to come to her back door, whilst Mrs. Sawney ascended her stairs. A moment later, the back window of No. 9 was thrown up with a flourish, and the hard face of Sandy's mistress appeared.

It was a curious circumstance that, although there was never any pre-arrangement, Mrs. Sawney always seemed to appear at the window just as Mrs. Grimps emerged from her back door, or the order would be reversed. Never had they been known both to appear together, either at window or at door. Their mutual understanding seemed to be that of the ancient pair in the old-fashioned weather-indicator.

"Good morning, Mrs. Grimps," called Mrs. Sawney from her post of vantage.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sawney," responded Mrs. Grimps. "Beautiful day, ain't it?"

"Fine dryin' weather," responded Mrs. Sawney.

"I see you got your washin' finished early yes'day."

"Yes, an' a rare lot there was this week," said Mrs. Sawney, settling her arms comfortably upon the window-sill. "You 'ad a tidy bit, too, I see."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Grimps, picking a back-tooth with a hair-pin. "Mr. Grimps is like Mr. Sawney, must 'ave 'is clean pair o' pants every week, 'e must, an' a shirt an' vest, too. I tell 'im he ought to 'ave been a millionaire."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Sawney, "I sometimes wishes my 'usband would be content with calico linings to 'is trousers, like some folks I could name. 'E's afraid o' them rubbin' 'im, 'e says; but then 'e always was clean in 'is 'abits."

This remark was directly levelled at Mrs. Bindle's censorship of everything appertaining to nether-laundry.

"Well, I must say I sympathises with 'im," remarked Mrs. Grimps, returning the hair-pin to where it belonged. "When I sees some folks' washing, I says to myself, I says, 'Wot can they wear underneath?'"

"An' well you might, Mrs. Grimps," cried Mrs. Sawney meaningly. "P'raps they spend the money on pink ribbons to tie up their lace curtains. It's all very well to make a show with yer windows, but," with the air of one who has made an important

discovery, " you can't be clean unless you're clean all over, I says."

Whilst these remarks were being bandied to and fro over her head, Mrs. Bindle had been engaged in pegging to the clothes-line the first batch of her week's wash. Her face was grimmer and harder than usual, and there was in her eyes a cold, grey look, suggestive of an iron control.

" Yes," proceeded Mrs. Grimps, " I always 'ave said an' always shall, that it's the underneaths wot count."

Mrs. Bindle stuck a peg in the corner of a table-cloth and, taking another from her mouth, she proceeded to the other end of the tablecloth and jabbed that, too, astride the line.

" Always 'ave dainty linjerry, 'Arriet," my pore mother used to say," continued Mrs. Sawney, " an' I always 'ave. After all, who wants three pillow-cases a week ? "

This was in the nature of a direct challenge, as Mrs. Bindle had just stepped back from attaching to the line a third pillow-case, which immediately proceeded to balloon itself into joyous abandon.

" If you *are* religious, you didn't ought to be cruel to dumb animals," announced Mrs. Grimps, " throwin' water over the pore creatures."

" That sort never is kind to anythink but their-selves," commented Mrs. Sawney, with the air of one who is well-versed in the ways of the devout.

Each time Mrs. Bindle emerged from her scullery that morning, her two relentless neighbours appeared

as if by magic, and oblique pleasantries ebbed and flowed above her head.

The episode of Mrs. Bindle's lock-out was discussed in detail. The "goody-goody" qualities affected by "some people" were commented on in relation to the more brutal instincts they occasionally manifested.

The treatment that certain pleasant-spoken husbands, whom it was "a pleasure to meet," received from their wives, whose faces were like "vinegar on the point of a needle," left both Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney incapable of expressing the indignation that was within them.

When Bindle came home to dinner, he found "Mrs. B. with a temper wot 'ad got a nasty edge on it," as he expressed it to one of his mates on his return to work. He was too wise, however, to venture an enquiry as to the cause. He realised that to ask for the wind might mean reaping the whirlwind.

Immediately after the meal, Mrs. Bindle proceeded to clear the lines to make room for another batch. She hoped to get done whilst her neighbours were at dinner; but she had not been in the garden half-a-minute before her tormentors appeared.

"I been thinkin' of keepin' a few fowls," remarked Mrs. Sawney, her mouth full of bread and cheese, "jest a 'andful of cocks an' a few 'ens," and she winked down at Mrs. Grimps, as Mrs. Bindle pegged a lace window-curtain on the line, having first subjected it to a vigorous rubbing with a duster.

"An' very nice too," agreed Mrs. Grimps; "I must say I likes an egg for my tea," she added, "only them cocks do fight so."

"Well, I shouldn't get too many," continued Mrs. Sawney, "say three cocks an' three 'ens. They ought to get on nicely together."

These remarks had reference to a one-time project of Mrs. Bindle to supply her table with new-laid eggs, in the pursuit of which she had purchased three pairs of birds, equally divided as to sex.

"That was the only time I ever enjoyed a bit o' cock-fightin' on my own," Bindle was wont to remark, when telling the story of Mrs. Bindle's application of the rule of monogamy to a fowl-run.

He had made one endeavour to enlighten Mrs. Bindle upon the fact that the domestic cock (she insisted on the term "rooster") had neither rounded Cape Turk, nor weathered Seraglio Point; but he was told not to be disgusting, Mrs. Bindle's invariable rejoinder when sex matters cropped up. He had therefore desisted, enjoying to the full Mrs. Bindle's efforts to police her new colony.

In those days, the Bindle's back garden had been a riot of flying feathers, belligerent cocks and squawking hens, chivvied about by Mrs. Bindle, armed with mop or broom.

Mrs. Sawney and a Mrs. Telcher, who had preceded Mrs. Grimps in the occupancy of No. 5, had sat at their bedroom windows, laughing until the tears ran down their dubious cheeks and their sides ached. When their mirth permitted, they had tendered advice;

but for the most part they were so weak from laughing that speech was denied them.

Mrs. Bindle's knowledge of the ways of fowls was limited; but it embraced one important piece of information—that without "roosters", hens would not lay. When Bindle had striven to set her right, he had been silenced with the inevitable, "Don't be disgusting."

She had reasoned that if hens were stimulated to lay by the presence of the "male bird", then a cavalier each would surely result in an increased output.

The fowls, however, had disappeared as suddenly as they had come, and thereafter Bindle realised that it was neither safe nor politic to refer to the subject. It had taken a plate of rice, hurled at his head from the other side of the kitchen, to bring him to this philosophical frame of mind.

For weeks afterwards, the children of Fenton Street would greet Mrs. Bindle's appearance with strange crowing noises, which pleased them and convulsed their parents; for Mrs. Bindle's fowls had become *the* joke of the neighbourhood.

"I must say I likes a man wots got a pleasant word for everyone," remarked Mrs. Sawney, some two hours later, as Mrs. Bindle picked up the clothes-basket containing the last of the day's wash, and made for the scullery door, "even when 'e ain't 'appy in 'is 'ome life," she added, as the scullery door banged-to for the day, and Mrs. Grimps concurred as she disappeared, to catch-up with the day's work as best she could, and prepare the children's tea.

III

That evening at supper, Bindle heard what had been withheld from Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney—Mrs. Bindle's opinion of her neighbours. With great dexterity, she managed to link him up with their misdeeds. He should have got on as his brother-in-law, Mr. Hearty, had got on, and then she would not have been forced to reside in a neighbourhood so utterly dead to all sense of refinement and proper conduct.

Bindle had come to regard Tuesdays as days of wrath, and he usually managed to slip out after supper with as little ostentation as possible. Reasoning that religion and cleanliness were productive of such mental disturbances, he was frankly for what he called "a dirty 'eathen"; but he was wise enough to keep his views to himself.

"If you were a man you'd stop it," she stormed, "allowing me to be insulted as I've been to-day."

"But 'ow can I stop you an' them a-scrappin'?" he protested, with corrugated forehead.

"You can go in and tell them that you won't have it."

"But then Sawney an' Grimps would start on me."

"That's what it is, you're afraid," she cried, triumphantly. "If you was a man you'd hit back; but you're not."

"But I ain't a-goin' to start fightin' because some one says I don't wear——"

"Stop it!"

And Bindle stopped it.

"Why don't you do something like Mr. Hearty?" demanded Mrs. Bindle, as he pushed back his chair and rose. She was determined not to be deprived of her scapegoat, at least not without another offensive.

He paused before replying, making sure that his line of retreat was open. The greengrocering success of her brother-in-law was used by Mrs. Bindle as a whip of scorpions.

"'Earty don't do things," he replied, sidling towards the door. "'E does people," and with footwork that would have made a champion fly-weight envious, he was out in the passage before Mrs. Bindle could retort.

Long and late that night she pondered over the indignities to which she had been subjected during the day. There were wanton moments when she yearned to be able to display to the neighbours the whole of her laundry—and Bindle's. Herself a connoisseur of garments that passed through the wash-tub, she knew that those of her house could hold their own, as joyously white and playful in the breeze as any that her neighbours were able to produce.

She had suffered with a still tongue; yet it had not turned aside wrath, particularly her own wrath. Instinctively, her thoughts reverted to the time when an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth were regarded as legal tender.

All that night and the next day she pondered. When Bindle returned on the Wednesday evening,

he found her almost light-hearted. "Gospel Bells", Mrs. Bindle's favourite hymn, was going with a rare swing, and during the meal that followed, she was bordering on the conversational.

Several times he regarded her curiously.

"Somethink's up," he muttered; but, too wise in his experience, he made no endeavour to probe the mystery.

For the rest of the week Mrs. Bindle spent every odd moment she could spare from her domestic duties in collecting what she mentally described as "rubbish". She went through each room with a toothcomb. By Saturday night, she had accumulated in the wash-house, a pile of odds and ends which, as Bindle said, would have been enough to start a rag-and-bone shop.

Curiously enough, Mrs. Bindle did not resent his remark; instead she almost smiled, so marked was her expression of grim complacency.

On Sunday at chapel, she sang with a vigour and fervency that attracted to her the curious gaze of more than one pair of eyes.

"Mrs. B.'s got somethink in 'er stockin'," mumbled Bindle, as he rose from the supper-table that night. "Never seen 'er so cheerio in all my puff. I 'ope it ain't drink."

Monday morning dawned, and Mrs. Bindle was up an hour earlier than usual, still almost blithe in her manner.

"Shouldn't be surprised if she's a-goin' to run away with ole 'Earty," muttered Bindle, as he took from

her almost gracious hands his third cup of tea at breakfast.

" You sings like a two-year-old, Lizzie," he ventured. " I like them little twiddley bits wot you been puttin' into that 'ymn."

The " twiddley bits " to which Bindle referred was her rendering of " bells," as a word of three syllables, " be-e-ells."

" You get on with your breakfast," was her retort ; but there was about it neither reproach nor rancour.

Again he looked at her curiously.

" Can't make 'er out these last few days," he muttered, as he rose and picked up his cap. " Somethink's up ! "

Mrs. Bindle proceeded to wash-up the breakfast things to the tune of " Hold the Fort." From time to time during the morning, she would glance out of the window to see if Mrs. Grimps, or Mrs. Sawney had yet begun to " hang-out ".

They were usually late ; but this morning they were later than usual. It was after ten before Mrs. Grimps appeared with the first basket of wet clothes. She was followed a few minutes later by Mrs. Sawney.

The two women exchanged greetings, the day was too busy a one for anything more.

As they pegged the various items of the week's wash to their respective lines, Mrs. Bindle watched from the back-bedroom window, her eyes like points of steel, her lips a grim grey line. She was experiencing the sensations of the general who sees the enemy delivered into his hands.

As soon as Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney had returned to their wash-tubs, Mrs. Bindle descended to the scullery, where lay the heap of rubbish she had collected during the previous week. With great deliberation she proceeded to stuff it into a clothes-basket, by means of which she transported the mass to the bottom of the garden, a proceeding which required several journeys.

Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps were too busily occupied to concern themselves with the movements of their neighbour.

Her task completed, Mrs. Bindle returned to her domestic duties, and in due time ate a solitary dinner, Bindle being engaged too far away to admit of his sharing it with her. She then proceeded upstairs to perform her toilette, as on Monday afternoons she always arranged to go out "dressed". This in itself was a direct challenge to Fenton Street, which had to stay at home and attend to the cleansing of its linen.

Her toilette finished, Mrs. Bindle slipped into the back bedroom. Below, her two neighbours were engaged in hanging-out the second instalment of their wash, the first batch having been gathered-in ready for the mangle. After that, they would eat their mid-day meal. Although no gossip, Mrs. Bindle was not unobservant, and she knew the movements of her neighbours as well as they knew hers.

A quarter of an hour later, the front door of No. 7 banged-to. Mrs. Bindle, in brown alpaca, a brown bonnet with a dash of purple, and biscuit-coloured

gloves, was going to see her niece, Millie Dixon, née Hearty, with whom she had arranged to spend the afternoon.

IV

"Mrs. Sawney! Mrs. Sawney! Come and look at your clothes!"

Mrs. Grimps, her hands on the top of the fence, shouted her thrilling appeal across the intervening garden.

Mrs. Sawney appeared, as if propelled from her scullery door by some unseen force.

For a moment she stood blinking stupidly, as dense volumes of smut-laden smoke ascended to the blueness of heaven from the garden of No. 7. It was only the smoke, however, that ascended. One glance at the piebald garments hanging from her linen-lines was sufficient to convince Mrs. Sawney of that.

"It's that woman," she almost screamed, as she began to pound at the fence dividing her garden from that of Mrs. Bindle. "I'll show 'er."

"Yes; but what about the ——" Mrs. Grimps broke-off, stifled by a volume of dense black smoke that curled across to her. "Look at them smuts."

Mrs. Bindle had taken the precaution of adding some paraffin and colza oil to her bonfire, which was now blazing merrily, sending forth an ever-increasing deluge of smuts, as if conscious of what was expected of it.

Mrs. Sawney continued to bang on the fence, whilst Mrs. Grimps dashed through her house and proceeded to pound at Mrs. Bindle's front door with a vigour born of hate and desperation.

"She's dorn out."

The information was vouchsafed by a little boy in petticoats, who had toddled uncertainly from the other side of the street, and now stood clinging to the railings with grubby hands.

Mrs. Grimps scurried back again to the scene of disaster.

She was just in time to see Mrs. Sawney take what appeared to be the tail-end of a header into Mrs. Bindle's back-garden, displaying in the process a pair of stockings that owed little to the wash-tub, and less to the darning-needle.

"Get some water," she gasped, as she picked herself up and once more consigned her hosiery to the seclusion of her skirts. Mrs. Grimps dashed into the scullery.

A minute later she reappeared with a large pail, from which water slopped as she walked. With much grunting and a considerable wetting of her own clothes, she succeeded in passing it over the fence to her neighbour.

With one hand grasping the handle and the other the rim at the base, Mrs. Sawney staggered towards the fire and inverted the pail. Then, with a scream, she dropped the pail, threw her apron over her head, and ran from the cloud of steam and the deluge of blacks that her rash act had occasioned.

"'Urt yerself?" enquired Mrs. Grimps, solicitously,

as she gazed mournfully at her ruined "wash", upon which big flakes of black were descending like locusts upon the fair lands of Pharaoh.

Mrs. Sawney removed the apron from her head, and blinked up at the sky, as if to assure herself that the blessing of sight was still hers.

"The wicked cat!" she vociferated, when she found that no damage had been done. "Come on, let's put it out," she exhorted as, with a swift movement, she picked up the pail and handed it over the fence to the waiting Mrs. Grimps.

Ten minutes later, the fire was extinguished; but the washing was ruined.

Mrs. Sawney gazed across the fence at a dishevelled caricature of Mrs. Grimps, with the full consciousness that she herself must look even worse. She also realised that she had to make the return journey over the fence, under the critical eyes of Mrs. Grimps, and that to climb a fence without an exposure of leg was an impossibility.

Both women were wet to the skin, as neither had proved expert in the handing of brimming pails of water over a wooden fence; both were spotted like the pard; both were in their hearts breathing dire vengeance upon the perpetrator of the outrage, who just at that moment was alighting from a tram at Hammersmith.

Throughout that afternoon, Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps waited; grim-lipped and hard-eyed they waited. Fenton Street was to see something that it had not

even dreamed of. Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps had decided unanimously to "show 'er."

Their offspring had been instructed that, at the sight of Mrs. Bindle, they were to return hot-foot and report.

The children had told their friends, and their friends had told their mothers, with the result that not only Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps; but every housewife in Fenton Street was on the qui vive.

Soon after six there were cries of "Here she comes," as if Mrs. Bindle had been the Boat Race, followed by a sudden stampede of children.

Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps rushed to action-quarters. Mrs. Sawney gave a stir to a pail of black-lead and water behind the front door, whilst Mrs. Grimps seized a soft broom, which she had saturated in water used for washing-up the dinner-things.

The children clustered round the gate, and hung on to the railings. Housewives came to their doors, or appeared at their bedroom windows. Fenton Street loved Drama, the bigger the "D" with which it was spelled, the more they enjoyed it.

Behind their front doors, Mrs. Sawney and Mrs. Grimps waited and watched. Suddenly the crowd that had attached itself to the railings began to melt away, and the babel of clattering voices died down. Several women were seen to leave their garden-gates and walk up the street. Still the two grim-faced women waited behind their "street-doors."

At length, as the last child left the railings and tore up the street, both women decided that something must have happened.

The sight of Mrs. Sawney at her door brought Mrs. Grimps to hers, just as Harriet, the nine years old daughter of Mrs. Sawney, rushed up breathless.

"She's comin'," gasped the child, whereat both women disappeared, Mrs. Sawney to grasp the handle of her pail, and Mrs. Grimps to seize her broom.

When Mrs. Bindle appeared, the centre of an eddying mass of children, with a few women on the outer fringe, she was carrying in her arms a child of about five, who was whimpering pitifully. Her bonnet had slipped back, her right hand, from which the biscuit-coloured glove had been removed, was stained with blood, whilst her umbrella was being carried, as if it were a sacred relic, by a curly-headed little lad who was living his hour.

At the sight of the procession, Mrs. Sawney let the handle of her pail fall with a clang, whilst Mrs. Grimps dropped her broom.

"It's my 'Ector," she screamed, as she bolted down the garden path. "Oh, my God! 'e's dead."

"Get some hot water," ordered Mrs. Bindle, as she pushed the mother aside and entered the gate. "He's cut his leg."

Followed by Mrs. Bindle, Mrs. Grimps bolted into the house. There was something in Mrs. Bindle's tone that brooked of no delay.

Watched by Mrs. Grimps, Mrs. Sawney, and several of their friends, Mrs. Bindle washed the wound and bound it up with clean white rag, in place of her own blood-soaked handkerchief, and she did her work with the thoroughness with which she did everything.

When she had finished, she took the child in her arms, and for an hour soothed it with the assurance that it was " the bravest little precious in all the world." When she made to transfer her burden to its mother's arms, the uproar that ensued decided Mrs. Bindle to continue her ministrations.

It was ten o'clock before she finally left Mrs. Grimps's house, and she did so without a word.

" Who'd 'ave thought it ! " remarked Mrs. Sawney, as Mrs. Bindle closed the gate.

" She's got a way with kids," admitted Mrs. Grimps. " I will say that for 'er," and in turning back along the dark hall, she fell over the broom with which she had intended to greet her neighbour.

Mrs. Sawney returned to her own house and hurled a saucepan at Sandy, a circumstance which kept him from home for two days and three nights—he was not a cat to take undue risks.

CHAPTER III

MRS. BINDLE ENTERTAINS

I

"BINDLE!" Mrs. Bindle stepped down from a chair, protected by her ironing-blanket, on which she had been standing to replace a piece of holly that had fallen from a picture.

She gazed at the mid-Victorian riot about her with obvious pride; it constituted her holy of holies. Upon it she had laboured for days with soap-and-water and furniture-polish, with evergreen and coloured candles, to render it worthy of the approaching festivity. She had succeeded only in emphasising its uncompromising atmosphere of coldness and angularity.

Antimacassars seemed to shiver self-consciously upon the backs of stamped-plush chairs, photo-frames, and what she called "knick-knacks," stared at one another in wide-eyed desolation; whilst chains of coloured paper, pale green and yellow predominating, stretched in bilious festoons from picture-nail to picture-nail.

On the mantelpiece, in wine-coloured lustres, which were Mrs. Bindle's especial glory, two long candles reared aloft their pink nakedness. They were never

to be lit and they knew it ; chilly, pink and naked they would remain, eventually to be packed away once more in the cardboard-box, from which for years they had been taken to grace each successive festivity.

It had always been Bindle's ambition to light these candles, which were probably the most ancient pieces of petroleum-wax in the kingdom ; but he lacked the moral courage.

" Funny thing you can't be clean without stinkin' like this," he had mumbled that morning, as he sniffed the air, reeking of turpentine with an underlying motif of yellow-soap. " I suppose 'appiness is like drink," he added, " it takes people different ways."

Passing over to the sideboard, Mrs. Bindle gazed down at the refreshments : sausage-rolls, sandwiches, rock-cakes, blanc-mange, jellies, three-cornered tarts, exuding their contents at every joint, chocolate-shape, and other delicacies.

In the centre stood a large open jam-tart made on a meat-dish. It was Mrs. Bindle's masterpiece, a tribute alike to earth and to heaven. On the jam, in letters contrived out of strips of pastry, appeared the exhortation, " Prepare to Meet Thy God."

Bindle had gasped at the sight of this superlative work of art and religion. " That's a funny sort o' way to give a cove a appetite," he had murmured. " If it 'adn't been Mrs. B., I'd 'ave said it was a joke."

It was with obvious satisfaction that Mrs. Bindle viewed her handiwork. At the sight of an iced-cake, sheltering itself behind a plate of bananas, she smiled. Here again her devotional instincts had triumphed.

On the uneven white surface, in irregular letters of an uncertain blue, was the statement, "The Wages of Sin is Death."

"Well, well, it ain't my idea of 'appiness."

She span round to find Bindle, who had entered unheard, gazing dubiously at the tart bearing the disconcerting legend.

"What's not your idea of happiness?" she demanded.

He grinned genially across at her.

"You'd like beer-bottles on the mantelpiece, I suppose," she continued, "and clay pipes and spittoons and——"

"Not for me, Mrs. B.," he retorted; "no one ain't never known me miss the fire-place yet."

Mrs. Bindle's lips tightened, as if she were striving to restrain the angry words that were eager to leap out.

She had planned a musical evening, with the object of assisting her brother-in-law in his aspirations as trainer of the choir at the Alton Road Chapel, a post which had recently fallen vacant.

By inviting some of the more humble members of the choir, those on a higher social plane than her own would scarcely be likely to accept, Mrs. Bindle had thought to further Mr. Hearty's candidature.

She recognised that their influence would be indirect in its action; but even that, she decided, would be an asset.

Mr. Hearty had readily consented to lend his harmonium, and had sent it round by his van. It took two men and a boy, together with Mr. Hearty and Mrs.

Bindle, a long time to persuade it along the narrow passage. Here it had incontinently stuck for nearly an hour. It was not until Bindle returned, to bring his professional experience to bear, that it had been coaxed into the parlour.

Christmas was near at hand, and for weeks past the choir had been working under forced-draught, practising carols. That had given Mrs. Bindle the idea of devoting her evening entirely to seasonable music.

"Wot jer call me for?" demanded Bindle presently, remembering the reason of his presence.

"Don't forget to get a pail of coals and put it in the kitchen," she ordered.

"We shan't want no coals, Mrs. B., with all that 'ot stuff we got a-comin'," he muttered lugubriously. "Why ain't we got a bit o' mistletoe?" he demanded.

"Don't be disgusting," she retorted.

"Disgustin'!" he cried innocently. "There ain't nothink disgustin' in a bit o' mistletoe."

"I won't have such things in my house," she announced with decision. "You've got a lewd mind."

"There ain't nothink lood in kissin' a gal under the mistletoe," he demurred, "or under anythink else," he added as an after-thought.

"You're nasty-minded, Bindle, and you know it."

"Well, wot are we goin' to do at a party if there ain't goin' to be no kissin'?" he persisted, looking about him with unwonted despondency.

"Mr. Hearty has lent us his harmonium!" she said with unction, gazing reverently across at the

instrument, which was the pride of her brother-in-law's heart.

"But wot's the use of an 'armonium," he complained. "You can't play 'unt the slipper, or postman's knock with an 'armonium."

"We're going to sing."

"Wot, 'ymns?" he groaned.

"No, carols," was the retort. "It's Christmas," she added as if by way of explanation.

"Well, it don't look like it, and it don't smell like it." He sniffed the atmosphere with obvious disgust. "Puts me in mind of 'orse-oils," he added.

"That's right, go on," she retorted tartly. "You're not hurting me, if you think it." She drew in her lips and crossed her hands in front of her, with Mrs. Bindle a manifestation of Christian resignation.

"I don't want to 'urt you, Lizzie; but I ask you, can you see me a-singin' carols?" He turned towards her a despondent eye of interrogation. "Me, at my age?"

"You're not asked to sing. You can go out and spend the evening swearing and drinking with your low companions." She moved over to the mantelpiece, and adjusted one of her beloved pink candles. "You'd only spoil the music," she added.

"If there wasn't no music there wouldn't be no religion," he grumbled. "It's 'armoniums in this world and 'arps in the next. I'd sooner be a pussyfoot than play an 'arp."

Mrs. Bindle ignored the remark, and proceeded to repile a plate of sausage-rolls to a greater symmetry,

flicking an imaginary speck of dust from a glass-jug of lemonade.

"Now mind," she cried, as he walked towards the door, "I won't have you spoiling my evening, you'd better go out."

"An 'usband's cross-roads, or why Bindle left 'ome," he grinned as he turned, winked at the right-hand pink candle and disappeared, leaving Mrs. Bindle to gaze admiringly at her handiwork. She had laboured very hard in preparing for the evening's festivities.

II

Half-way down the stairs, Mrs. Bindle paused to listen. Her quick ears had detected the sound of voices at the back-door, and what was undoubtedly the clink of bottles. Continuing her descent, she entered the kitchen, pausing just inside the door.

"That's all right, 'Op-o'-my-thumb. A dozen it is," she heard Bindle remark to someone in the outer darkness. There was a shrill "Good-night," and Bindle entered the kitchen from the scullery, carrying a beer-bottle under each arm and one in either hand.

"Who was that?" she demanded, her eyes fixed upon the bottles.

"Oh! jest a nipper wot 'ad brought somethink for me," he said with assumed unconcern.

"What did he bring?" she demanded, her eyes still fixed on the bottles.

"Some beer wot I ordered."

"What for?"

"To drink." He looked at her as if surprised at the question.

"I didn't suppose you'd bought it to wash in," was the angry retort. "There are four bottles in the cupboard. They'll last till Saturday. Why did you order more?" Mrs. Bindle was obviously suspicious.

"P'raps somebody'll get dry to-night," he temporised.

"Don't you tell me any of your wicked lies, Bindle," she cried angrily. "You know they're all temperance. How many did you order?"

"Oh, jest a few," he said, depositing the bottles on the lower shelf of the dresser. "Nothink like 'avin' a bottle or two up yer sleeve."

"Why have you got your best suit on?" She regarded with disapproval the blue suit and red necktie Bindle was wearing. Her eyes dropped to the white cuffs that only a careful manipulation of his thumbs prevented from slipping off altogether.

"Ain't it the night of the party?" he enquired innocently.

"I told you that I won't have you come in, you with your common ways and low talk."

"That's all right," he replied cheerfully. "I'm a-goin' to sit in the kitchen."

"And what good will that do you?" she demanded suspiciously. "Another time, when I'm alone, you can go out fast enough. Now because I've got a few friends coming, nothing will move you."

"But I want to 'ear the music," he protested. "P'raps I'll get to like carols if I 'ear enough of 'em," he added, with the air of one who announces that some day he hopes to acquire a taste for castor-oil.

"You're enough to try the patience of a saint," she cried, still eyeing the bottles of beer. "I suppose you're up to some devilment. It wouldn't be you to let me enjoy myself."

"I likes to see you enjoyin' yerself, Lizzie," he protested. "'Ow'd you like ole Ginger to run in an'——?"

"If that man enters my house I'll insult him!" she cried, her eyes glinting angrily.

"That ain't easy," he replied cheerfully, "unless you was to drink 'is beer. That always gets 'is rag out."

"I won't have that man in my house," she stormed. "You shall not pollute my home with your foul-mouthed, public-house companions. I——"

"Ole Ging is all right," Bindle assured her, as he proceeded to fetch four more bottles from the scullery. "All you got to do is to give 'im some beer, play 'All is Forgiven Wot 'Appened on Peace Night,' an' let 'im stamp 'is feet to the chorus, an' 'e's one of the cheerfullest coves wot you'll find."

"Well, you bring him here and see what I'll do," she announced darkly.

"That's all right, Mrs. B., don't you worry. I jest asked 'Uggles to run round an' keep me company, and Wilkie may drop in if 'e ain't too busy coughin'; but they shan't get mixed up with the canaries—they

won't want to after wot I'm goin' to tell 'em, an' we'll all be as quiet as mice."

"If you bring any of your friends into the parlour, Bindle," she cried, "I'll turn the gas out."

"Naughty!" he admonished, wagging at her a playful forefinger. "I ain't a-goin' to allow——"

"Stop it!" and with that she bounced out of the kitchen and dashed upstairs to the bedroom, banging the door behind her.

"Ain't women funny," he grumbled, as he fetched the remaining four bottles of beer from the scullery, and placed them upon the shelf of the dresser. "Nice ole row there'd 'ave been if I'd said anythink about turnin' out the gas. That's why ole 'Earty's so keen on them choir practices. I bet they got a penny-in-the-slot meter, an' everybody takes bloomin' good care to leave all their coppers at 'ome."

Overhead, Mrs. Bindle could be heard giving expression to her feelings in the opening and shutting of drawers.

"Well, well!" he sighed philosophically, "I suppose you can't 'ave everythink, as the cove said when 'e found the lodger 'ad gone orf with 'is trousers on Bank 'Oliday," and he proceeded to gather together two cracked tumblers, which had been censored by Mrs. Bindle as unfit for her guests, a large white mug, with a pink band and the remains of a view of Margate, and a pint jug with a pink butterfly on the spout.

"We're a-goin' to enjoy ourselves, any-old-'ow," he murmured as, picking up a meat-dish from the dresser,

he slipped into the parlour, returning a moment later with it piled with rock-cakes, sandwiches and sausage-rolls. These he hid on the bottom shelf of the dresser, placing a pair of boots in front of them.

"Jest in time," he muttered, as Mrs. Bindle was heard descending the stairs. "It's—'Ullo!" he broke off, "'ere's the first appetite," as a knock was heard at the front door.

For the next ten minutes, Mrs. Bindle was busy conducting her guests upstairs to "take off their things." Their escorts waited in the passage, clearing their throats, or stroking their chins. Convention demanded that they should wait to make a formal entry into the parlour with their wives.

With his ear pressed against the kitchen door, Bindle listened with interest, endeavouring to identify from their voices the arrivals as they passed.

By ten minutes past seven, the sounds in the passage had ceased—the guests had all come. In Mrs. Bindle's circle it was customary to take literally the time mentioned in the invitation, and to apologise for even a few minutes' lateness.

In order that the Montagues should not become confused with the Capulets, Bindle had taken the precaution of asking his own friends to come to the back door. He had added that the beer would be in the kitchen.

Mrs. Bindle had always been immovable in her determination that Bindle's "low public-house companions" should not have an opportunity of "insulting" her friends from the Alton Road Chapel.

With Mrs. Bindle the first quarter-of-an-hour of her rare social gatherings was always a period of anguish and uncertainty. Although everybody knew everybody else, all were constrained and ill-at-ease.

Miss Lamb kept twirling her rolled-gold bracelet round her lace-mittened wrist, smiling vacantly the while. Miss Death seemed unable to keep her hard grey eyes, set far too closely together, from the refreshment sideboard, whilst Mrs. Dykes, a tiny woman in a fawn skirt and a coral-pink blouse, was continually feeling the back of her head, as if anticipating some catastrophe to her hair.

Mrs. Hearty, who began in a bright blue satin blouse, and ended in canary-coloured stockings thrust into cloth shoes with paste buckles, beat her breast and struggled for breath. Mr. Hearty was negative, conversationally he was a bankrupt, whilst Mrs. Stitchley was garrulous and with a purpose. She was bent upon talking down the consciousness that she had not been invited.

Her excuse for coming, at least the excuse she made to herself, was that of chaperoning her daughter, a near-sighted, shapeless girl, with no chest and a muddy complexion, who never had and never would require such an attention.

The others were just neuter, except Mr. Thimbell, whose acute nervousness and length of limb rendered him a nuisance.

Mrs. Bindle was conscious that she was looking her best in a dark blue alpaca dress, with a cream-coloured lace yoke, which modesty had prompted her to have

lined with the material of the dress. To her, the display of any portion of her person above the instep, or below the feminine equivalent of the "Adam's apple," was a tribute to the Mammon of Unrighteousness, and her dressmaker was instructed accordingly.

She moved about the room, trying to make everyone feel at home, and succeeding only in emphasising the fact that they were all out.

Everybody was anxious to get down to the serious business of the evening; still the social amenities had to be observed. There must be a preliminary period devoted to conversation.

After a quarter-of-an-hour's endeavour to exchange the ideas which none of them possessed, Mrs. Bindle moved over to Mr. Hearty and whispered something, at the same time glancing across at the harmonium. There was an immediate look of interest and expectancy on faces which, a moment before, had been blank and apathetic.

Mr. Goslett, a little man with high cheekbones and a criminal taste in neckwear, cleared his throat; Mr. Hearty surreptitiously slipped into his mouth an acid drop, which he had just taken from his waistcoat pocket; Mr. Dykes, a long, thin man, who in his youth had been known to his contemporaries as "Razor," drew his handkerchief with a flourish, and tested Mrs. Bindle's walls as if he were a priest before Jericho.

Some difficulty arose as to who should play Mr. Hearty's beloved instrument. Mrs. Stitchley made it clear that she expected her daughter, Mabel, to be

asked. Mrs. Bindle, however, decided that Mrs. Snarch, a colourless woman who sang contralto (her own contralto) and sniffed when she was not singing contralto, should preside; her influence with her fellow-members of the choir was likely to be greater. Thus in the first ten minutes Mrs. Bindle scored two implacable enemies and one dubious friend.

Mrs. Snarch took her seat at the harmonium, fidgetted about with her skirts and blinked near-sightedly at the book of carols, which seemed disinclined to remain open. The others grouped themselves about her.

There was a medley of strange sounds, as each member of the party took the necessary steps to ensure purity of vocal tone. Added to this, Mr. Dykes pulled his collar away from his throat and stretched his neck upwards, as if to clear a passage for the sound he intended to send forth. Mr. Goslett pushed his sandy moustache up from his full lips with the back of his right forefinger, whilst Miss Stitchley moistened and remoistened her thin, colourless lips.

Then they joined together in song.

After a preliminary carol, in which no one seemed to take any particular interest, they got off well together with "Good King Wenceslas," a prime favourite at the Alton Road Chapel.

This evening it proved an enormous success.

Miss Stitchley's shrillness clashed with Mrs. Bindle's sharpness more than in the preceding carol. Mr. Hearty shut his eyes more tightly and was woollier, Mr. Dykes got more breath behind his boom, and

Mrs. Dykes made more mistakes in her "harmony." Mr. Goslett raised his head higher, looking more than ever like a chicken drinking, whilst Miss Death's thin, upper notes seemed to pierce even Mr. Dykes's boom, just as they put Miss Lamb, always uncertain as to pitch, even further off her stroke.

Still, everyone enjoyed it immensely. Even Mrs. Stitchley, who confessed that she was "no 'and at singin'," croaked a few husky notes, as she sat acutely upright, due to a six-and-elevenpenny pair of stays she had bought that afternoon, nodding her head and beating time.

Mrs. Stitchley never lost an opportunity of making clear her position in regard to music.

"I'm musical, my dear," she would say. "It's in the fambly; but I don't sing, I 'as spasms, you know." She volunteered this information much as a man might seek to excuse his inability to play the French horn by explaining that he is addicted to bass viol.

"Now that's what I call a carol," said Mrs. Stitchley, endeavouring to prevent the upper portion of her stay-busk from burying itself in her flesh. Then, with sudden inspiration, she cried, "Encore! Encore!" and made a motion to clap her hands; but the stay-busk took the opportunity of getting in a vicious dig. With a little yelp of pain, Mrs. Stitchley's hands flew to her rescue.

Everybody was too pleased with "Good King Wenceslas" to trouble about Mrs. Stitchley's stay-busk. The word "encore," however, had given them

an idea. Mr. Hearty looked interrogatingly at Mrs. Bindle.

"Do you think——" he began.

"Shall we have it again?" she queried, and there was a chorus of pleased acquiescence. Everybody was determined to put a little bit more into the encore than into the original rendering. There was only one dissentient voice, that of Mr. Dykes, who was eager for "The First Noël," which gave him such a chance for individual effort. When out with the Chapel Christmas singers, Mr. Dykes had been known to awaken as many as six streets with a single verse of that popular carol.

Mrs. Bindle almost smiled. Her party was proving a success.

Mrs. Stitchley, still holding the top of her stay-busk in her left hand, nodded approval, her beady little eyes fixed upon the singers. She was awaiting an opportunity to bring from her pocket a half-quartern bottle containing what, if she had been caught drinking it, she would have described as clove-water, taken medicinally.

To give colour to her assertion, she always chewed a clove after each reference to the bottle.

At The Golden Horse, Mrs. Stitchley's clove-water was known as Old Tom Special.

For an hour Mrs. Bindle's guests sang, encoring themselves with enthusiasm. Mr. Dykes got in his famous "Noël," he pronounced it "No-ho-hell," and everyone else seemed satisfied, if a little sore of throat.

It was half-past eight when Mrs. Bindle decided that the time had come for refreshments.

Throughout the evening her ears had been keenly alert for sounds from the kitchen ; but beyond a suppressed hum of voices, she could detect nothing ; still she was ill-at-ease. If Mrs. Hearty, for instance, knew that Bindle was in the house, she would certainly go over to the enemy.

In the matter of catering for her guests Mrs. Bindle had nothing to learn. She was a good cook and delighted in providing well for those she entertained. Her sausage-rolls, straightforward affairs in which the sausage had something more than a walking-on part, were famous among her friends. Her blancmange, jam puffs, rock-cakes, and sandwiches had already established her reputation with those who had been privileged to taste them. She basked in the sunshine of the praise lavished on what she provided. Without it she would have felt that her party was a failure.

This evening there was no lack of approval, cordially expressed. Mrs. Stitchley, who purposely had partaken of a light luncheon and no tea, was particularly loud in her encomiums, preluding each sausage-roll she took, from the sixth onwards, with some fresh adjective.

Mrs. Bindle was almost happy.

She was in the act of pouring out a glass of lemonade for Miss Lamb, when suddenly she paused. An unaccustomed sound from the kitchen had arrested her hand. Others heard it too, and the hum of con-

versation died away into silence, broken only by Mr. Hearty's mastication of a sausage-roll.

Through the dividing wall came the sound of a concertina. Mrs. Bindle put down the jug and turned towards the door. As she did so a thin, nasal voice broke into song:

> For 'e was oiled in every joint,
> A bobby came up who was standin' point.
> He blew 'is whistle to summon more,
> Bill got 'ome on the point of 'is jaw.
> Then 'e screamed, an' kicked, an' bit their knees,
> As each grabbed a leg or an arm by degrees.
> An' that's 'ow Bill Morgan was taken 'ome
> On the night of 'is first wife's funeral.

The verse was followed by a full-throated chorus, accompanied by a pounding as if someone were hurling bricks about.

After that came silence; but for the hum of conversation, above which rose Bindle's voice forbidding further singing until "them next door 'ave 'ad a go."

The guests looked at one another in amazement. The set expression of Mrs. Bindle's face hardened, and the lines of her mouth became grim. Her first instinct had been to rush to the kitchen; but she decided to wait. She did not want a scene whilst her guests were there.

Gradually the carol-singers returned to their plates and glasses, and Mr. Hearty's mastication was once more heard in their midst. Mr. Hearty always ate with relish.

Unobserved by Mrs. Bindle, Mrs. Hearty stole out of

the parlour on her way to investigate; a minute later Mrs. Stitchley followed. The solitude of the passage gave her an admirable opportunity of finishing the "clove-water" she had brought with her.

When everyone had assured Mrs. Bindle, in answer to her pressing invitation to refresh themselves still further, that they "really couldn't, not if she were to pay them," she turned once more to Mr. Hearty for the necessary encouragement to start another carol.

Their first effort, however, clearly showed that Mrs. Bindle's refreshments had taken the edge off their singing. Miss Stitchley had lost much of her shrillness, Mrs. Bindle was less sharp and Mr. Hearty more woolly. Mr. Dykes's boom was but a wraith of its former self, proving the truth of Mrs. Dykes's laughing remark that if he ate so many of Mrs. Bindle's sausage-rolls he wouldn't be able to sing at all. Only Miss Death was up to form, her shrill soprano still cleaving the atmosphere like a javelin.

As the last chords of the carol died away, the concertina in the kitchen took up the running, followed a minute later by the same voice as before, singing nasally about the adventures of a particularly rollicking set of boon-companions who knew neither care nor curfew.

At the first sound, Mrs. Bindle moved swiftly to the door, where she paused uncertainly. She was in a quandary. Her conception of good manners did not admit of a hostess leaving her guests; still something had to be done.

At the conclusion of the verse the voice ceased; but the concertina wailed on. Mrs. Bindle drew breath. Her guests gazed at one another in a dazed sort of way. Then with a crash came the chorus, rendered with enthusiasm:

> We'll all roll 'ome, we'll all roll 'ome,
> For 'ome's the only place for weary men like us,
> We'll all roll 'ome, we'll all roll 'ome,
> For we 'aven't got the money to pay for a bus.
> For it's only 'alf-past two,
> An' it won't be three just yet.
> So we'll all roll 'ome, we'll all roll 'ome,
> An' lay down in the passage to be out of the wet.

The applause that followed was annihilating. Accompanying it again was the curious banging sound which Mrs. Bindle had noticed before. She was sure she recognised amid the cries of approval, the sound of a woman's voice. That decided her. She had already noted the absence of Mrs. Hearty and Mrs. Stitchley.

Without so much as an apology to her guests, who stood still gazing blankly at one another, Mrs. Bindle slipped out into the passage, closing the door behind her, much to the disappointment of the others.

A moment later she threw open the kitchen door, conscious that one of the most dramatic moments of her life was at hand.

Through a grey film of tobacco smoke she saw half-a-dozen men, one seated on the floor, another on the fender, and two on the table. All were smoking.

About the room were dotted bottles and various

drinking vessels, mostly cups, whilst on the mantelpiece were Bindle's white cuffs, discarded on account of their inconvenient habit of slipping off at every movement of his hands.

Mrs. Hearty was seated in front of the dresser, holding a glass of beer in one hand and beating her breast with the other, whilst opposite to her sat Mrs. Stitchley, one hand still clutching the top of her stay-busk, an idiotic smirk upon her moist face.

As Mrs. Bindle gazed upon the scene, she was conscious of a feeling of disappointment; no one seemed to regard her presence as any deviation from the normal. Mrs. Stitchley looked up and nodded. Bindle deliberately avoided her eye.

Mrs. Bindle's attention became focussed upon the man seated on her fender. In his hands he grasped a concertina, before him were stretched a pair of thin legs in tight blue trousers. Above a violent blue necktie there rose a pasty face, terminating in a quiff of amazing dimensions, which glistened greasily in the gaslight. His heavy-lidded eyes were half-closed, whilst in his mouth he held a cigarette, the end of which was most unwholesomely chewed. His whole demeanour was that of a man who had not yet realised that the curtain had risen upon a new act in the drama.

As Mrs. Bindle appeared at the kitchen door, the concertina once more began to speak. A moment later the musician threw back his head and gave tongue, like a hound baying at the moon:

For I love my mother, love 'er with all my 'eart,
I can see 'er now on the doorstep, the day we 'ad to part.
A man that's got a tanner, can always get a wife,
But a mother is just a treasure that comes once in a life.

"Now then, ladies and gents, chorus if *you* please," he cried.

They did please, and soon Mrs. Bindle's kitchen echoed with a full-throated rendering of:

We all love mother, love her all the time,
For there ain't no other who seems to us the same.
From babyhood to manhood, she watches o'er our lives,
For it's mother, mother, mother, bless the dear old name.

It was a doleful refrain, charged with cockney melancholy; yet there could be no doubt about the enthusiasm of the singers. Mrs. Hearty spilled beer over her blue satin bosom, as a result of the energy with which she beat time; Mrs. Stitchley's hand, the one not grasping her stay-busk, was also beating time, different time from Mrs. Hearty's, whilst two light-coloured knees rose and fell with the regularity of piston-rods, solving for Mrs. Bindle the mystery of the sounds like the tossing about of bricks she had heard in the parlour.

Ginger was joining in the chorus!

As the singer started the second verse, Mrs. Bindle was conscious that someone was behind her. She turned to find Miss Stitchley standing at her shoulder. A moment later she realised that the little passage was overflowing with carol-singers.

Still she made no sign, not even when Miss Stitchley slipped past her and took up a position behind her

mother's chair. Mrs. Bindle realised that she was faced with a delicate situation.

The second chorus still further complicated matters. Mrs. Bindle was sure she heard the haunting refrain mumbled from behind her. She turned quickly; but treason came from the other direction. Suddenly Miss Stitchley burst into song, and the passage, throwing aside its hesitation, joined in, softly it is true, still it joined in.

"Come in, everybody!" cried Mrs. Stitchley, when the chorus ceased, momentarily forgetful that it was Mrs. Bindle's kitchen.

"Ain't 'e clever," she added, looking admiringly at the musician, who glanced up casually at the mistress of the house. Art Wiggins was accustomed to feminine worship and unlimited beer; he regarded them as the natural tributes to his genius.

"Come in, the 'ole lot," cried Bindle cheerily, as he proceeded to unscrew the stopper of a bottle. "'Ave a wet, Art," he cried, addressing the vocalist. "You deserves it."

The remainder of the parlour-party filtered into the kitchen, and Mrs. Bindle realised the anguish of a Louis XVIII. Her legions had gone over to the enemy.

"Now this," remarked Mrs. Stitchley to Ginger a quarter-of-an-hour later, "is wot I calls a cosy evenin'."

To which Ginger grumbled something about not "'oldin' wiv women."

Art Wiggins was the hero of the occasion. He

smoked halves of endless cigarettes, chewing the remainder; he drank beer like a personified Sahara, and a continuous stream of song flowed from his lips.

When at length he paused to eat, Mrs. Stitchley took up the running, urged on by Bindle, to whom she had confided that, as a girl, she had achieved what was almost fame with, "I Heard the Mavis Singing."

Art Wiggins did not know the tune; but was not to be deterred.

"Carry on, mother," he cried through a mouthful of ham-sandwich, "I'll pick it up."

The result was that Art played something strongly reminiscent of "Bubbles," whilst Mrs. Stitchley was telling how she had heard the mavis singing, to the tune of "Swanee." It was a great success until Art, weary of being so long out of the picture, threw "Bubbles," "Swanee," Mrs. Stitchley and the mavis overboard, and broke into a narrative about a young man of the name of Bert, who had become enamoured of a lady whose abbreviated petticoats made an excellent rhyme for the hero's name.

Mrs. Stitchley continued singing; but Art and Bert and the young lady of his choice, plus the concertina, left her little or no chance.

Like a figure of retribution Mrs. Bindle stood in the doorway, hard of eye and grim of lip, whilst just behind her Mr. Hearty picked nervously at the quicks of his fingers.

The other guests had proved opportunists. They had thrown over the sacred for the profane.

They came out particularly strong in the choruses.

III

" I never remember sich a evenin', my dear," was Mrs. Stitchley's valediction. " Stitchley'll be sorry 'e missed it," she added, indifferent to the fact that he had not been invited.

She was the last to go, just as she had been the first to arrive. Throughout the evening she had applauded every effort of Art Wiggins to add to what Bindle called " the 'armony of the evenin'."

" I have enjoyed it, Mrs. Bindle," said Miss Stitchley. " It was lovely."

With these encomiums ringing in her ears, and confirmed by what she herself had seen and heard, Mrs. Bindle closed the door and returned to the kitchen.

Bindle watched her uncertainly as she tidied up the place, whilst he proceeded to arrange upon the dresser the beer-bottles, sixteen in number and all empty.

As a rule he could anticipate Mrs. Bindle's mood ; but to-night he was frankly puzzled. When he had asked Huggles and Wilkes to drop in " for a jaw," he had not foreseen that on the way they would encounter Ginger, his cousin Art Wiggins and two bosom friends of Art, nor could he be expected to foresee that Art went nowhere without his concertina. It was as much part of him as his elaborate quiff.

Their arrival had inspired Bindle with something

akin to panic. For a long time he had striven to mute Art's musical restiveness. At length he had been over-ruled by the others, and Art had burst into song about Bill Morgan and his first wife's funeral. After that, as well try to dam Niagara as seal those lips of song.

Mrs. Bindle's grim silence as she moved about the kitchen disconcerted Bindle. He was busy speculating as to what was behind it all.

"Been a 'appy sort of evenin'," he remarked at length, as he proceeded to knock the ashes out of his pipe.

Mrs. Bindle made no response; but continued to gather together the plates and glasses and place them in two separate bowls in the sink.

"Seemed to enjoy theirselves," he ventured a few minutes later. "Joined in the choruses too."

Bindle's remark was like a shot fired at a waterspout, Mrs. Bindle's wrath burst its bounds and engulfed him.

"One of these days you'll kill me," she shrilled, dropping into a chair, "and then p'raps you'll be 'appy."

"Wot 'ave I done now?" he enquired.

"You've made me ashamed of you," she stormed. "You've humiliated me before all those people. What must they think, seein' me married to one who will suffer unto the third and fourth generation and——"

"But I can't——"

"You will and you know it," she cried. "Look at the men you 'ad 'ere to-night. You never been a proper 'usband to me. Here have I been toiling and

moiling, inching and pinching, working my fingers to the bone for you, and then you treat me like this."

Bindle began to edge almost imperceptibly towards the door.

"See how you've humiliated me," her voice began to quaver. "What will they say at the Chapel? They know all about you, whistling on Sundays and spending your time in public-houses, while your wife is working herself to skin an' bone to cook your meals and mend your clothes. What'll they say now they've seen the low companions you invite to your home? They'll see how you respect your wife."

Still Bindle made no retort; but in a subdued murmur hummed "Gospel Bells," Mrs. Bindle's favourite hymn, which he used as a snake-charmer uses a flute.

"You're glad, I know it," she continued, exasperated by his silence. "Glad to see your wife humiliated. Look at you now! You're glad." Her voice was rising hysterically. "One of these days I shall go out and never return, and then you'll be——"

Like a tornado the emotional super-storm burst, and Mrs. Bindle was in the grip of screaming hysterics.

She laughed, she cried, she exhorted, she reproached. Everything evil that had ever happened to her, or to the universe, was directly due to the blackness of Bindle's heart and the guiltiness of his conscience. He was the one barrier between her and earthly heaven. He had failed where Mr. Hearty had succeeded. She poured upon him a withering stream of invective,—and she did it at the top of her voice.

At first Bindle stared ; then he gazed vaguely about him. He made a sudden dive for the cupboard, rummaged about until he found the vinegar-bottle. Pouring some out into a saucer, he filled it up with water and returned to where Mrs. Bindle sat, slopping the liquid as he went.

Mrs. Bindle was now engaged in linking him up with Sodom and Gomorrah, the fate that befell Lot's wife and Dr. Crippen. Then, with a final scream, she slipped from her chair to the floor, where she lay moaning and sobbing.

With an earnest, anxious look in his eyes, Bindle knelt beside her and from the saucer proceeded to sprinkle her generously with vinegar and water, until in odour she resembled a freshly-made salad.

When he had sprinkled the greater part of the contents of the saucer on to her person, he sat back on his heels and, with grave and anxious eyes, regarded her as a boy might who has lighted the end of a rocket and waits expectantly to see the result.

Gradually the storm of emotion died down and finally ceased. He still continued to gaze fixedly at Mrs. Bindle, convinced that vinegar-and-water was the one and only cure for hysterics.

Presently, she straightened herself. She moved, then struggling up into a sitting position, she looked about her. The unaccustomed smell assailed her nostrils, she sniffed sharply two or three times.

"What have you been doing?" she demanded.

"I been bringin' you to," he said, his forehead still ribbed with anxiety.

"Oh! you beast, you!" she moaned, as she struggled to her feet. "You done it on purpose."

"Done wot on purpose?" he enquired.

"Poured vinegar all over me and soaked me to the skin. You've spoilt my dress. You——" and with a characteristically sudden movement, she turned and fled from the room and upstairs, banging the door with a ferocity that shook the whole house.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered. "An' me thinkin' she'd like me to bring 'er round," and he slipped out into the parlour, which wore a very obvious morning-after-the-party aspect. His object was to give Mrs. Bindle an opportunity of returning. He knew her to be incapable of going to bed with her kitchen untidy.

He ate a sausage-roll and a piece of the admonitory jam-tart, listening keenly for sounds of Mrs. Bindle descending the stairs. Finally he seated himself on the stamped-plush couch and absent-mindedly lighted his pipe.

Presently he heard a soft tread upon the stairs, as if someone were endeavouring to descend without noise. He sighed his relief.

Ten minutes later he rose and stretched himself sleepily. There were obvious sounds of movement in the kitchen.

"Now if I wasn't the bloomin' coward wot I am," he remarked, as he took a final look round, "I'd light them two candles; but I ain't got the pluck."

With that he turned out the gas and closed the door.

"You take those bottles into the scullery and be

quick about it," was Mrs. Bindle's greeting as he entered the kitchen.

She fixed her eye on the platoon of empty beer-bottles that Bindle had assembled upon the dresser.

He paused in the act of digging into his pipe with a match-stick. He had been prepared for the tail-end of a tornado, and this slight admonitory puff surprised him.

"Well! did you hear?"

Without a word the pipe was slipped into his pocket, and picking up a brace of bottles in either hand he passed into the scullery.

As he did so a strange glint sprang into Mrs. Bindle's eyes. With a panther-like movement she dashed across to the scullery door, slammed it to and turned the key. A second later the kitchen was in darkness, and Mrs. Bindle was on her way upstairs to bed.

The continuous banging upon the scullery door as she proceeded leisurely to undress was as sweet music to her ears.

That night Bindle slept indifferently well.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMING OF JOSEPH THE SECOND

"WHY can't you drink your tea like a Christian?" Mrs. Bindle hurled the words at Bindle as if she hoped they would hit him.

He gazed at her over the edge of the saucerful of tea, which he had previously cooled by blowing noisily upon it. A moment later he proceeded to empty the saucer with a sibilant sound suggestive of relish. He then replaced it upon the table.

"Might as well be among pigs, the way you behave at table," she snapped and, as if to emphasise her own refinement in taking liquids, she lifted her cup delicately to her lips, the little finger of her right hand crooked at an awkward angle.

Bindle leaned slightly towards her, his hand to his ear. Ignoring his attitude, she replaced the cup in the saucer.

"You done that fine, Mrs. B. I didn't 'ear a sound," and he grinned in that provocative manner which always fanned the flame of her anger.

"Pity you don't learn yourself, instead of behaving as you do."

"But 'ow am I to know 'ow a Christian drinks?"

he demanded, harking back to Mrs. Bindle's remark. "There's 'Earty now, 'e's a Christian; but he sucks in 'is whiskers as if 'e was 'ungry."

"Oh! don't talk to me," was the impatient response, as she proceeded to pour herself out another cup of tea.

"Wotjer marry me for, then? I told you I was always chatty at breakfast."

"Don't be disgusting!" she cried angrily. He stared at her in genuine astonishment. "You know I never allowed you to say such things to me before we were married."

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered as he pushed across his cup that it might be refilled.

"Millie's coming this afternoon."

"Millie!" he cried, his face beaming. "She all right again?"

"Don't be disgusting," she said.

"Disgustin'," he repeated vaguely. Then understanding came to him.

Millie Dixon, née Hearty, had, some weeks previously, presented her husband with "a little Joe." These had been her first words to Charley Dixon when he, still partially in the grip of the terror through which he had passed, had been taken by the nurse to be introduced to his son and heir, whilst a pale, tired Millie smiled bravely up at him.

To Mrs. Bindle the very mention of the word "babies" in mixed company was an offence. The news that he was an uncle had reached Bindle from Mrs. Hearty, Mr. Hearty sharing his sister-in-law's

views upon reticence in such delicate and personal matters.

"She goin' to bring it with 'er?" Bindle enquired eagerly; but Mrs. Bindle, anticipating such a question, had risen and, going over to the sink, had turned on the tap, allowing the question to pass in a rushing of water.

"Funny feelin' like that about babies," he muttered as he rose from the table, his meal completed. "I suppose that's why she wouldn't let me keep rabbits."

"Charley's coming in later; he's going to mend Aunt Anne's musical-box," was Mrs. Bindle's next announcement.

Bindle whistled incredulously.

"What's the matter now?"

"You ain't goin' to trust 'im with Ole Dumb Abraham, are you?" he asked in a hushed voice.

"And why not, pray?" she challenged. "Millie says Charley is very clever at mending things, and it's never played."

Bindle said nothing. The musical-box had been left to Mrs. Bindle by "poor Aunt Anne"—Mrs. Bindle referred to all dead relatives as "poor"; it was her one unconscious blasphemy. Dumb Abraham, as Bindle called the relic, had always been the most sacred among Mrs. Bindle's household gods. It had arrived dumb, and dumb it had remained, as she would never hear of it leaving the house to be put in order.

If Bindle ever went into the parlour after dark, he was always told to be careful of Aunt Anne's musical-box. Many a battle had been waged over its dumb

ugliness. Once he had rested for a moment upon its glassy surface a half-smoked cigar, a thoughtless act which had resulted in one of the stormiest passages of their married life.

"Well!" challenged Mrs. Bindle, as he remained silent.

"I didn't say anythink," he mumbled, picking up his cap and making for the door, thankful that it was Saturday, and that he would be home in time to see his beloved niece.

That afternoon Bindle arrived home with his pockets bulging, and several parcels of varying sizes under his arm.

"What have you got there?" demanded Mrs. Bindle, who was occupied in spreading a white cloth upon the kitchen table.

"Oh! jest a few things for 'is Nibs," was the response.

"For who?"

"The nipper," he explained, as he proceeded to unburden himself of the parcels, laying them on the dresser.

"I wish you'd try and talk like a Christian," and she banged a metal tea-tray upon the table.

Bindle ignored her remark. He was engaged in taking from its wrappings a peculiarly hideous rag-doll.

Mrs. Bindle paused in her preparations to watch the operation.

"What's that for?" she demanded aggressively.

"Millie's kid," he replied, devoting himself to the opening of other packages, and producing a monkey-

on-a-stick, an inexpensive teddy-bear, a jack-in-the-box and several metal animals, which on being blown through emitted strident noises.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, wasting money on hideous things like that. They'd frighten the poor child to death."

"Frighten 'im!" he cried. "These ain't goin' to frighten 'im. You wait an' 'ear wot 'e's got to say about 'em."

"You just clear those things out of my kitchen," was the uncompromising rejoinder. "I won't have the poor child sent into convulsions because you're a fool."

There was something in her voice which caused Bindle meekly to gather together the toys and carry them out of the kitchen and upstairs, where he placed them in a drawer devoted entirely to his own possessions.

"Well, I'm blowed," he murmured, as he laid them one beside another. "And me a-thinkin' they'd make 'im laugh;" with that he closed the drawer, determined that, at least, Millie should see the toys that were as much a tribute to her as to her offspring.

"Fancy little Millikins 'avin' a kid all of 'er own," he muttered, as he descended the stairs, "'er wot I used to dangle on my knee till she crowed again. Well, well," he added as he opened the kitchen door, "we ain't none of us gettin' younger."

"Wot's that?" enquired Mrs. Bindle.

"Merely a sort o' casual remark that none of us ain't puttin' back the clock."

Mrs. Bindle sniffed disdainfully, and busied herself with preparations for tea.

"Why didn't you tell me before that Millikins was comin'?" he enquired.

"Because you're never in as any other decent husband is."

He recognised the portents and held his peace.

When Mrs. Bindle was busy, her temper had a tendency to be on what Bindle called "the short side," and then even her favourite hymn, "Gospel Bells," frequently failed to stem the tide of her wrath.

"Ain't we goin' to 'ave tea in the parlour?" he enquired presently, as Mrs. Bindle smoothed the cloth over the kitchen table.

"No, we're not," she snapped, thinking it unnecessary to add that Millie had particularly requested that she might have it "in your lovely kitchen," because she was "one of the family."

Although Bindle infinitely preferred the kitchen to that labyrinth of furniture and knick-knacks known as the parlour, he felt that the occasion demanded the discomfort consequent upon ceremony. He was, however, too wise to criticise the arrangement; for Mrs. Bindle's temper and tongue were of a known sharpness that counselled moderation.

She had made no mention of the time of Millie's arrival, and Bindle decided not to take the risk of enquiring. He contented himself with hovering about, getting under Mrs. Bindle's feet, as she expressed it, and managing to place himself invariably in the exact spot she was making for.

If he sat on a chair, Mrs. Bindle seemed suddenly to discover that it required dusting. If he took refuge in a corner, Mrs. Bindle promptly dived into it with an "Oh! get out of my way, do," and he would do a swift side-step, only to make for what was the high-road of her next strategic move.

"Why don't you go out like you always do?" she demanded at one point.

"Because Millikins is comin'," he replied simply.

"Yes, you can stay at home for—when somebody's coming," she amended, "but other days you leave me alone for weeks together."

"But when I do stay at 'ome you 'ustles me about like a stray goat," he complained, only just succeeding in avoiding a sudden dash on Mrs. Bindle's part.

"That's right, go on. Blame everything on to me," she cried, as she made a swift dive for the stove, and proceeded to poke the fire as if determined to break the fire-brick at the back. "If you'd only been a proper 'usband to me I might have been different."

Bindle slipped across the kitchen and stepped out into the passage. Here he remained until Mrs. Bindle suddenly threw open the kitchen door.

"What are you standing there for?" she demanded angrily.

"So as not to get in the way," was the meek reply.

"You want to be able to tell Millie that you were turned out of the kitchen," she stormed. "I know you and your mean, deceitful ways. Well, stay there if you like it!" and she banged the door, and Bindle heard the key turn in the lock.

"There's one thing about Mrs. B.," he remarked, as he leaned against the wall, "she ain't dull."

When at length the expected knock came, it was Mrs. Bindle who darted out and opened the door to admit Millie Dixon, carrying in her arms the upper end of what looked like a cascade of white lace.

A sudden fit of shyness seized Bindle, and he retreated to the kitchen; whilst aunt and niece greeted one another in the passage.

"Where's Uncle Joe?" he heard Millie ask presently.

"I'm 'ere, Millikins," he called-out, "cookin' the veal for that there young prodigal."

A moment later Millie, flushed and happy, fluttered into the room, still holding the cascade of lace.

"Darling Uncle Joe," she cried, advancing towards him.

He took a step backwards, a look of awe in his eyes, which were fixed upon the top of the cascade.

"Aren't you going to kiss me, Uncle Joe?" she asked, holding up her face.

"Kiss you, my dear, why——" Bindle was seized with a sudden huskiness in his voice, as he leaned forward gingerly and kissed the warm red lips held out to him.

"Is that It?" he asked, looking down with troubled eyes at Millie's burden.

"This is Little Joe," she said softly, the wonder-light of motherhood in her eyes, as she placed one foot on the rail of a chair to support her precious burden, thus releasing her right hand to lift the veil from a red

and puckered face, out of which gazed a pair of filmy blue eyes.

"Ooooooosssss." Instinctively Bindle drew a deep breath as he bent a few inches forward.

For fully a minute he stood absorbing all there was to be seen of Joseph the Second.

"'E ain't very big, is 'e?" he enquired, raising his eyes to Millie's.

"He's only six weeks old," snapped Mrs. Bindle, who had followed Millie into the kitchen and now stood, with ill-concealed impatience, whilst Bindle was gazing at the infant. "What did you expect?" she demanded.

"Don't 'e look 'ot?" said Bindle at length, his forehead seamed with anxiety.

"Hot, Uncle Joe?" enquired Millie, unable to keep from her voice a tinge of the displeasure of a mother who hears her offspring criticised.

"I mean 'e don't look strong," he added hastily, conscious that he had said the wrong thing.

"Don't be silly, Uncle Joe, he's just a wee little baby, aren't you, bootiful boy?" and she gazed at the red face in a way that caused Bindle to realise that his niece was now a woman.

"'E's the very spit of 'is old uncle, ain't 'e?" and he turned to Mrs. Bindle for corroboration.

She ignored the remark; but Millie smiled sympathetically.

"I 'ad a takin' way with me when I was a little 'un," continued Bindle reminiscently. "Why, once I was nearly kissed by a real lady—one with a title, too."

"Oh! do tell me, Uncle Joe," cried Millie, looking at him with that odd little lift of the brows, which always made Charley want to kiss her. She had heard the story a score of times before.

"Well, 'er 'usband was a-tryin' to get into Parliament, an' 'is wife, wot was the lady, came round a-askin' people to vote for 'im. Seein' me in my mother's arms, she says, 'Wot a pretty child.' You see, Millikins, looks was always my strong point," and he paused in the narrative to grin.

"Then she bends down to kiss me," he continued, "an' jest at that moment wot must I go and do but sneeze, an' that's 'ow I missed a kiss an' 'er 'usband a vote."

"Poor Uncle Joe," laughed Millie, making a little motion with her arms towards Mrs. Bindle.

Without a word, Mrs. Bindle took the precious bundle of lace, out of which two filmy eyes gazed vacantly. With a swaying movement she began to croon a meaningless tune, that every now and then seemed as if it might develop into "Gospel Bells"; yet always hesitated on the brink and became diverted into something else.

The baby turned on her a solemn, appraising look of interrogation, then, apparently approving of the tune, settled down comfortably to enjoy it.

Bindle regarded Mrs. Bindle with wonder. Into her eyes had crept a something he had only once seen there before, and that was on the occasion he had brought Millie to Fenton Street when she left home.

Seeing that "Baby" was content, Millie dropped

into a chair with a tired little sigh, her eyes fixed upon the precious bundle of lace containing what would one day be a man.

Mrs. Bindle continued to sway and croon in a way that seemed to Little Joe's entire satisfaction.

"Aren't you glad we called him after you, Uncle Joe?" said Millie, tearing her eyes with difficulty from the bundle and turning them upon Bindle.

"Yer aunt told me," he said simply.

"Oh! I do hope he'll grow up like you, Uncle Joe, dear Uncle Joe," she cried, clasping her hands in her earnestness, as if that might help to make good her wish.

"Like me?" There was wonder and incredulity in his voice.

"Charley says he *must* grow up like you, darling Uncle Joe. You see——" She broke off as Bindle suddenly turned and, without a word, made for the door. A moment later it banged-to behind him, arousing Mrs. Bindle from her pre-occupation.

"Where's your Uncle gone?" she enquired, lifting her eyes from their absorbed contemplation of the flaming features of her nephew.

"He's—he's gone to fetch something," lied Millie. Instinctively she felt that this was an occasion that called for anything but the truth. She had seen the unusual brightness of Bindle's eyes.

From the passage he was heard vigorously blowing his nose.

"It's them toys he's after," said Mrs. Bindle, with scornful conviction.

"Toys?" Millie looked up enquiringly.

"He bought a lot of hideous things for this little precious," and her eyes fell upon the bundle in her arms, her lips breaking into a curve that Bindle had never seen.

"You see, Millie," she continued, "he doesn't know. We've neither chick nor child of——" She broke off suddenly, and bowed her head low over the baby.

In a second Millie was on her feet, her arm round Mrs. Bindle's shoulders.

"Dear Aunt Lizzie!" she cried, her voice a little unsteady. "Darling Aunt Lizzie. I—I know—I——"

At this point Joseph the Second, objecting to the pressure to which he was being subjected between the two emotional bosoms, raised his voice in protest, just as Bindle entered, his arms full of the toys he had bought.

He stood in the doorway, gaping with amazement.

As Mrs. Bindle caught sight of him, she blinked rapidly.

"Don't bring that rubbish in here," she cried with a return to her normal manner. "You'll frighten the child out of its life."

"Oh! Uncle Joe," cried Millie, as Bindle deposited the toys on the table. "I think you're the darlingest uncle in all the world."

There were tears in the eyes she turned on him.

Mrs. Bindle swung her back on the pair, as Bindle proceeded to explain the virtues and mechanism of his purchases. She was convinced that such monstrosities would produce in little Joseph nothing less

than convulsions, probably resulting in permanent injury to his mind.

Whilst they were thus engaged, Mrs. Bindle walked up and down the kitchen, absorbed in the baby.

"Auntie Lizzie," cried Millie presently, "please bring Little Joe here."

Mrs. Bindle hesitated. "They'll frighten him, Millie," she said, with a gentleness in her voice that caused Bindle to look quickly up at her.

To disprove the statement, and with all the assurance of a young mother, Millie seized the rag-doll and a diminutive golliwog, and held them over the recumbent form of Joseph the Second.

In an instant a pudgy little hand was thrust up, followed immediately after by another, and Joseph the Second demonstrated with all his fragile might that, as far as toys were concerned, he was at one with his uncle.

Bindle beamed with delight. Seizing the monkey-on-a-stick he proceeded vigorously to work it up and down. The pudgy hands raised themselves again.

"Oh! let Uncle Joe hold him," cried Millie, in ecstasy at the sight of the dawning intelligence on the baby's face.

"Me!" cried Bindle in horror, stepping back as if he had been asked to foster-mother a vigorous young rattlesnake. "Me 'old It?" He looked uncertainly at Mrs. Bindle and then again at Millie. "Not for an old-age pension."

"He'll make him cry," said Mrs. Bindle with con-

viction, hugging Little Joe closer and increasing the swaying movement.

"Oh yes, you must!" cried Millie gaily. "I'll take him, Auntie Lizzie," she said, turning to Mrs. Bindle, who manifested reluctance to relinquish the bundle.

"I might 'urt 'im," protested Bindle, retreating a step further, his forehead lined with anxiety.

"Now, Uncle Joe," commanded Millie, extending the bundle, "put your arms out."

Bindle extended his hands as might a child who is expecting to be caned. There was reluctance in the movement, and a suggestion that at any moment he was prepared to withdraw them suddenly.

"Not that way," snapped Mrs. Bindle, with all the scorn of a woman's superior knowledge.

Millie settled the matter by thrusting the bundle into Bindle's arms and he had, perforce, to clasp it.

He looked about him wildly, then, his eyes happening to catch those of Joseph the Second, he forgot his responsibilities, and began winking rapidly and in a manner that seemed entirely to Little Joe's satisfaction.

"Oh, Auntie Lizzie, look," cried Millie. "Little Joe loves Uncle Joe already." The inspiration of motherhood had enabled her to interpret a certain slobbering movement about Little Joe's lips as affection.

"Oh, look!" she cried again, as one chubby little hand was raised as if in salutation. "Auntie Lizzie——" She suddenly broke off. She had caught sight of the tense look on Mrs. Bindle's face as she gazed at the baby, and the hunger in her eyes.

Without a word she seized the bundle from Bindle's

arms and placed it in those of her aunt, which instinctively curved themselves to receive the precious burden.

"There, darling Joeykins," she crooned as she bent over her baby's face, as if to shield from Mrs. Bindle any momentary disappointment it might manifest. "Go to Auntie Lizzie."

"'Ere, wot 'ave I——?" began Bindle, when he was interrupted by a knock at the outer door.

"That's Charley," cried Millie, dancing towards the door in a most unmatronly manner. "Come along, Uncle Joe, he's going to mend the musical-box," and with that she tripped down the passage, had opened the door and was greeting her husband almost before Bindle had left the kitchen.

"Come in here," she cried, opening the parlour door, and hardly giving Bindle time to greet Charley.

"'Ere," cried Bindle, "why——?"

"Never mind, Uncle Joe, Charley's going to mend the musical-box."

"But wot about it—'im," Bindle corrected himself, indicating the kitchen with a jerk of his thumb.

"Charley's-going-to-mend-the-musical-box," she repeated with great distinctness. And again Bindle marvelled at the grown-upness of her.

He looked across at his nephew, a puzzled expression creasing his forehead.

"Better do as she says, Uncle Joe," laughed Charley. "It saves time."

"But——" began Bindle.

"There it is, Charley," cried Millie, indicating a

mahogany object, with glass top and sides that gave an indelicate view of its internal organism. Being a dutiful husband, Charley lifted down the box and placed it on to the table.

"For Gawd's sake be careful of Ole Dumb Abraham," cried Bindle. "If——"

"Of who?" cried Millie, her pretty brows puckered.

Bindle explained, watching with anxious eyes as Charley lifted the treasure from the small table on which it habitually rested, and placed it upon the centre table, where Millie had cleared a space.

Charley's apparent unconcern gave Bindle an unpleasant feeling at the base of his spine. He had been disciplined to regard the parlour as holy ground, and the musical-box as the holiest thing it contained.

For the next three-quarters of an hour Bindle and Millie watched Charley, as, with deft fingers, he took the affair to pieces and put it together again.

Finally, with much coaxing and a little oil, he got it to give forth an anæmic interpretation of "The Keel Row." Then it gurgled, slowed down and gave up the struggle, in consequence of which Charley made further incursions into its interior.

Becoming accustomed to the thought of Aunt Anne's legacy being subjected to the profanation of screw-driver and oil-bottle, Bindle sat down by the window, and proceeded to exchange confidences with Millie, who had made it clear to him that her aunt and son were to be left to their tête-à-tête undisturbed.

The conversation between uncle and niece was punctuated by snatches from "The Keel Row," as

Charley was successful in getting the sluggish mechanism of Dumb Abraham into temporary motion.

Occasionally he would give expression to a hiss or murmur of impatience, and Millie would smile across at him an intimate little smile of sympathy.

Suddenly, gaunt tragedy stalked into the room.

Crash!

"My Gawd!"

"Oh, Charley!"

"Damn!"

And Poor Aunt Anne's musical-box lay on the floor, a ruin of splintered glass.

Charley Dixon sucked a damaged thumb, Millie clung to his arm, solicitous and enquiring, whilst Bindle gazed down at the broken mass, fear in his eyes, and a sense of irretrievable disaster clutching at his heart.

Charley began to explain, Millie demanded to see the damaged thumb—but Bindle continued to gaze at the sacred relic.

Five minutes later, the trio left the parlour. As noiselessly as conspirators they tiptoed along the passage to the kitchen door, which stood ajar.

Through the aperture Mrs. Bindle could be seen seated at the table, Joseph the Second reposing in the crook of her left arm, whilst she, with her right hand, was endeavouring to work the monkey-on-a-stick.

In her eyes was a strange softness, a smile broke the hard lines of her mouth, whilst from her lips came an incessant flow of baby language.

For several minutes they watched. They saw Mrs.

Bindle lay aside the monkey-on-a-stick, and bend over the babe, murmuring the sounds that come by instinct to every woman's lips.

At a sign from Millie, they entered. Mrs. Bindle glanced over her shoulder in their direction ; but other and weightier matters claimed her attention.

" Lizzie," began Bindle, who had stipulated that he should break the awful news, urging as his reason that it had to be done with " tack." He paused. Mrs. Bindle took no notice ; but continued to bend over Little Joe, making strange sounds.

" Lizzie——" he began, paused, then in a rush the words came. " We broken the musical-box."

He stopped, that the heavens might have an opportunity of falling.

" Did-he-love-his-Auntie-Lizzie-blossom-um-um-um-um."

Charley and Millie exchanged glances ; but Bindle was too intent upon his disastrous mission to be conscious of anything but the storm he knew was about to break.

" Did you 'ear, Lizzie," he continued. " We broken the musical-box. Smashed it all to smithereens. Done for it," he added, as if to leave no loophole for misconception as to the appalling nature of the tragedy.

He held his breath, as one who has just tugged at the cord of a shower-bath.

" Oh ! go away do ! " she cried. " Um-um-um-um-prettyums."

" Pore Aunt Anne's musical-box," he repeated dully. " It's smashed."

"Oh, bother the musical-box! Um-um-um-per-weshus-um-um-um."

Mrs. Bindle had not even looked up.

It was Millie who shepherded the others back into the parlour, where Bindle mopped his brow, with the air of a man who, having met death face to face, has survived.

"Well, I'm blowed!" was all he said.

And Millie smiled across at Charley, a smile of superior understanding.

CHAPTER V

MRS. BINDLE BURNS INCENSE

"I WONDER you allow that girl to wear such disgusting clothes."

For the last five minutes Mrs. Bindle had been watching Alice, Mrs. Hearty's maid, as she moved about the room, tidying-up. The girl had just returned from her evening out, and her first act had been to bring Mrs. Hearty her nightly glass of Guinness and "snack of bread-and-cheese," an enormous crust torn from a new cottage loaf and plentifully spread with butter, flanked by about a quarter-of-a-pound of cheese. Now that the girl had left the room, Mrs. Bindle could contain herself no longer.

Mrs. Hearty was a woman upon whom fat had descended as a disguise. Her manifold chins rippled downwards until they became absorbed in the gigantic wave of her bust. She had a generous appetite, and was damned with a liking for fat-forming foods.

With her sister she had nothing in common; but in Bindle she had found a kindred spirit. The very sight of him would invariably set her heaving and pulsating with laughter and protestations of "Oh, Joe, don't!"

For response to her sister's comment, Mrs. Hearty

took a deep draught of Guinness and then, with a film of froth still upon her upper lip, she retorted, " It's 'er night out," and relapsed into wheezes and endeavours to regain her breath.

Mrs. Bindle was not in a good humour. She had called hoping to find Mr. Hearty returned from choir-practice, after which was to be announced the deacons' decision as to who was to succeed Mr. Smithers in training the choir.

Her brother-in-law's success was with her something between an inspiration and a hobby. It became the absorbing interest in life, outside the chapel and her home. No wife, or mother, ever watched the progress of a husband, or son, with keener interest, or greater admiration, than Mrs. Bindle that of Mr. Hearty.

As a girl, she had been pleasure-loving. There were those who even went to the extent of regarding her as flighty. She attended theatres and music-halls, which she had not then regarded as " places of sin," and her contemporaries classified her as something of a flirt ; but disillusionment had come with marriage. She soon realised that she had made the great and unforgivable mistake of marrying the wrong man. It turned her from the " carnal," and was the cause of her joining the Alton Road Chapel, at which Mr. Hearty worshipped.

From that date she began a careful and elaborate preparation for the next world.

Although she nightly sought the Almighty to forgive her her trespasses, volunteering the information

that she in turn would forgive those who trespassed against her, she never forgave Bindle for his glib and ready tongue, which had obscured her judgment to the extent of allowing to escape from the matrimonial noose, a potential master-greengrocer with three shops.

There was nothing in her attitude towards Mr. Hearty suggestive of sentiment. She was a woman, and she bowed the knee at an altar where women love to worship.

"I call it——" Mrs. Bindle stopped short as Alice re-entered the room with a small dish of pickled onions, without which Mrs. Hearty would have found it impossible to sleep.

With a woman's instinct, Alice realised that Mrs. Bindle disapproved of her low-cut, pale blue blouse, and the short skirt that exposed to the world's gaze so much of the nether Alice.

"You ain't been lonely, mum?" she queried solicitously, as she took a final look round before going to bed, to see that everything was in order.

Mrs. Hearty shook her head and undulated violently.

"It's my breath," she panted, and proceeded to hit her chest with the flat of her doubled-up fist. "'Ad a nice time?" she managed to gasp in the tone of a mistress who knows and understands, and is known and understood by, her maid.

"Oh! it was lovely," cried Alice ecstatically. "I went to the pictures with "—she hesitated and blushed —"a friend," then, pride getting the better of self-consciousness, she added, "a gentleman friend, mum.

There was a filum about a young girl running away with 'er boy on a horse who turned out to be a millionaire and she looked lovely in her veil and orange-blossom and 'im that 'andsome."

"And when's it to be, Alice?" enquired Mrs Hearty, between the assaults upon her chest.

"Oh, mum!" giggled Alice, and a moment later she had disappeared round the door, with a "Good night, mum, mind you sleeps well."

"I'm surprised the way you let that girl talk to you, Martha," snapped Mrs. Bindle, almost before the door had closed behind the retreating Alice. "You allow her to be too familiar. If you give them an inch, they'll take an ell," she added.

"She's a good gal," gasped Mrs. Hearty, as she lifted the glass of Guinness to her lips. "It's gone orf," she added a moment later. "It ain't wot it used to be," and she shook a despondent head as she replaced the almost empty glass upon the table.

"You'd be better without it," was the unsympathetic rejoinder, then, not to be diverted from the topic of Alice and her scanty attire, Mrs. Bindle added, "Her blouse was disgusting, and as for her skirt, I should be ashamed for her to be seen entering my house."

Mrs. Bindle believed in appearances as she believed in "the Lord," and it is open to question, if the two had at any time clashed, whether appearances would have been sacrificed.

"She's all right," wheezed Mrs. Hearty comfortably, through a mouthful of bread-and-cheese.

"The way girls dress now makes me hot all over," snapped Mrs. Bindle. "The police ought to stop it."

"They,"—with a gigantic swallow Mrs. Hearty reduced the bread-and-cheese to conversational proportions,—"they like it," she gasped at length, and broke into ripples and wheezes.

"Don't be disgusting, Martha. You make me ashamed. You ought to speak to Alice. It's not respectable, her going about like that."

Mrs. Hearty made an effort to speak; but the words failed to penetrate the barrage of bread-and-cheese — Mrs. Hearty did everything with gusto.

"Supposing I was to go out in a short skirt like that. What would you say then?"

"You—you ain't got the legs, Lizzie," and Mrs. Hearty was off into a paroxysm of gasps and undulations.

"Oh don't, don't," she gasped, as if Mrs. Bindle were responsible for her agony. "You'll be the death of me," she cried, as she wiped her eyes with a soiled pocket-handkerchief.

To Mrs. Hearty, laughter came as an impulse and an agony. She would implore the world at large not to make her laugh, heaving and shaking as she protested. She was good-natured, easy-going, and popular with her friends, who marvelled at what it was she had seen in the sedate and decorous Mr. Hearty to prompt her to marry him.

During her sister's paroxysm, Mrs. Bindle preserved

a dignified silence. She always deplored Mrs. Hearty's lack of self-control.

"There are the neighbours to consider," she continued at length. Mrs. Bindle's thoughts were always with her brother-in-law. "Look how low her blouse was."

"It's 'ealthy," puffed Mrs. Hearty, who could always be depended upon to find excuses for a black sheep's blackness.

"I call it disgusting." Mrs. Bindle's mouth shut with a snap.

"You——" Mrs. Hearty's reply was stifled in a sudden fit of coughing. She heaved and struggled for breath, while her face took on a deep purple hue.

Mrs. Bindle rose and proceeded to bestow a series of resounding smacks with the flat of her hand upon Mrs. Hearty's ample back. There was a heartiness in the blows that savoured of the Old rather than the New Testament.

Nearly five minutes elapsed before Mrs. Hearty was sufficiently recovered to explain that a crumb had gone the wrong way.

"Serves you right for encouraging that girl in her wickedness," was Mrs. Bindle's unsympathetic comment as she returned to her chair. Vaguely she saw in her sister's paroxysm, the rebuke of a frowning Providence.

"You wasn't always like wot you are now," complained Mrs. Hearty at length.

"I never dressed anything like that girl." There was a note of fierceness in Mrs. Bindle's voice,

"and I defy you to say I did, Martha Hearty, so there."

"Didn't I 'ave to speak to you once about your stockings?" Mrs. Hearty's recent attack seemed to have rendered speech easier.

"No wonder you choke," snapped Mrs. Bindle angrily, "saying things like that."

"Didn't the boys shout after you 'yaller legs'?" she gasped, determined to get the full flavour out of the incident. "They wasn't worn coloured then."

"I wonder you aren't afraid of being struck dead," cried Mrs. Bindle furiously.

"And you goin' out in muslin and a thin petticoat, and yer legs showin' through and the lace on——"

"Don't you dare——" Mrs. Bindle stopped, her utterance strangled. Her face was scarlet, and in her eyes was murder. She was conscious that her past was a past of vanity; but those were days she had put behind her, days when she would spend every penny she could scrape together upon her person.

But Mrs. Hearty was oblivious to the storm of anger that her words had aroused in her sister's heart. The recollection of the yellow stockings and the transparent muslin frock was too much for her, and she was off into splutters and wheezes of mirth, among which an occasional "Oh don't!" was distinguishable.

"I don't know what's coming to girls, I'm sure," cried Mrs. Bindle at length. She had to some extent regained her composure, and was desirous of turning the conversation from herself. She lived in fear of

her sister's frankness; Mrs. Hearty never censored a wardrobe before speaking of it.

"They're a lot of brazen hussies," continued Mrs. Bindle, "displaying themselves like they do. I can't think why they do it."

"Men!" grunted Mrs. Hearty.

"Don't be disgusting, Martha."

"You always was a fool, Lizzie," said Mrs. Hearty good-humouredly.

Mrs. Bindle was determined not to allow the subject of Alice's indelicate display of her person to escape her. She had merely been waiting her opportunity to return to the charge.

"You should think of Mr. Hearty," she said unctuously; "he's got a position to keep up, and people will talk, seeing that girl going out like that."

At this, Mrs. Hearty once more became helpless with suppressed laughter. Her manifold chins vibrated, tears streamed down her cheeks, and she wheezed and gasped and struck her chest, fierce, resounding blows.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped at length. "You'll be the death of me, Lizzie," and then another wave of laughter assailed her, and she was off again.

Presently, as the result of an obvious effort, she spluttered, "'E likes it, too," she ended in a little scream of laughter. "You watch him. Oh, oh, I shall die!" she gasped.

"Martha, you ought to be ashamed of yourself," she cried angrily. "You're as bad as Bindle."

For fully a minute, Mrs. Hearty rocked and heaved,

as she strove to find utterance for something that seemed to be stifling her.

"You don't know Alf!" she gasped at length, as she mopped her face with the dingy pocket-handkerchief. "Alice gives notice," she managed to gasp. "Alf tries to kiss——" and speech once more forsook her.

The look in Mrs. Bindle's eyes was that she usually kept for blasphemers. Mr. Hearty was the god of her idolatory, impeccable, austere and unimpeachable. The mere suggestion that he should behave in a way she would not expect even Bindle to behave, filled her with loathing, and she determined that her sister would eventually share the fate of Sapphira.

"Martha, you're a disgrace," she cried, rising. "You might at least have the decency not to drag Mr. Hearty's name into your unclean conversation. I think you owe him an apology for——"

At that moment the door opened, and Mr. Hearty entered.

"Didn't you, Alf?" demanded Mrs. Hearty.

"Didn't I what, Martha?" asked Mr. Hearty in a thin, woolly voice. "Good evening, Elizabeth," he added, turning to Mrs. Bindle.

"Didn't you try to kiss Alice, and she slapped your face?" Mrs. Hearty once more proceeded to mop her streaming eyes with her handkerchief. The comedy was good; but it was painful.

For one fleeting moment Mr. Hearty was unmasked. His whole expression underwent a change. There was fear in his eyes. He looked about him like a hunted

animal seeking escape. Then, by a great effort, he seemed to re-assert control over himself.

" I—I've forgotten to post a letter," he muttered, and a second later the door closed behind him.

" 'E's always like that when I remind him," cried Mrs. Hearty, " always forgotten to post a letter."

" Martha," said Mrs. Bindle solemnly, as she resumed her seat, " you're a wicked woman, and to-night I shall ask God to forgive you."

" Make it Alf instead," cried Mrs. Hearty.

Five minutes later, Mr. Hearty re-entered the parlour, looking furtively from his wife to Mrs. Bindle. He was a spare man of medium height, with an iron-grey moustache and what Bindle described as " 'alleluia whiskers " ; but which the world knows as mutton-chops. He was a man to whom all violence, be it physical or verbal, was distasteful. He preferred diplomacy to the sword.

" Oo's got it, Alf ? " enquired Mrs. Hearty, suddenly remembering the chapel choir and her husband's aspirations.

" Mr. Coplestone." The natural woolliness of Mr. Hearty's voice was emphasised by the dejection of disappointment ; but his eyes told of the relief he felt that Alice was no longer to be the topic of conversation.

" It's a shame, Mr. Hearty, that it is."

Mrs. Bindle folded her hands in her lap and drew in her chin, with the air of one who scents a great injustice. The injustice of the appointment quite blotted-out from her mind all thought of Alice.

"You got quite enough to do, Alf," wheezed Mrs. Hearty as, after many ineffectual bounces, she struggled to her feet, and stood swaying slightly as she beat her breast reproachfully.

"I could have found time," said Mr. Hearty, as he picked nervously at the quicks of his finger-nails.

"Of course you could," agreed Mrs. Bindle, looking up at her sister disapprovingly.

"I've never once missed a choir-practice," he continued, with the air of a man who is advancing a definite claim.

"Trust you," gasped Mrs. Hearty, as she rolled towards the door. "It's them gals," she added. "Good-night, Lizzie. Don't be long, Alf. You always wake me getting into bed," and, with a final wheeze, she passed out of the room.

Mr. Hearty coughed nervously behind his hand; whilst Mrs. Bindle drew in her lips and chin still further. The indelicacy of Mrs. Hearty's remark embarrassed them both.

It had always been Mr. Hearty's wish to train the choir at the Alton Road Chapel, and when Mr. Smithers had resigned, owing to chronic bronchitis and the approach of winter, Mr. Hearty felt that the time had come when yet another of his ambitions was to be realised. There had proved, however, to be another Richmond in the field, in the shape of Mr. Coplestone, who kept an oil-shop in the New King's Road.

By some means unknown to Mr. Hearty, his rival had managed to invest the interest of the minister

and several of the deacons, with the result that Mr. Hearty had come out a very bad second.

Now, in the hour of defeat, he yearned for sympathy, and there was only one to whom he could turn, his sister-in-law, who shared so many of his earthly views and heavenly hopes. Would his sister-in-law believe——

"I call it a shame," she said for the second time, as Mr. Hearty drew a deep sigh of relief. In spite of herself, Mrs. Bindle was irritated at the way in which he picked at the quicks of his finger-nails, "and you so musical, too," she added.

"I have always been interested in music," said Mr. Hearty, with the air of one who knows that he is receiving nothing but his due. Alice and her alluring clothing were forgotten. "I had learned the Tonic Sol-fa notation by heart before I was twenty," he added.

"You would have done so much to improve the singing." Mrs. Bindle was intent only on applying balm to her hero's wounds. She too had forgotten Alice and all her ways.

"It isn't what it might be," he remarked. "It has been very indifferent lately. Several have noticed it. Last Sunday, they nearly broke down in "The Half Was Never Told."

Mrs. Bindle nodded.

"They always find it difficult to get high 'f'," he continued. "I should have made a point of cultivating their upper registers," he added, with the melancholy retrospection of a man who, after a fire, states that it had been his intention to insure on the morrow.

"Perhaps——" began Mrs. Bindle, then she stopped. It seemed unchristian to say that perhaps Mr. Coplestone would have to relinquish his newly acquired honour.

"I should also have tried to have the American organ tuned, I don't think the bellows is very sound, either."

For some minutes there was silence. Mr. Hearty was preoccupied with the quicks of his finger-nails. He had just succeeded in drawing blood, and he glanced covertly at Mrs. Bindle to see if she had noticed it.

"Er——" he paused. He had been seeking an opportunity of clearing his character with his sister-in-law. Suddenly inspiration gripped him.

"I—we——" he paused. "I'm afraid Martha will have to get rid of Alice."

"And about time, with clothes like she wears," was Mrs. Bindle's uncompromising comment.

"And she tells—she's most untruthful," he continued eagerly; he was smarting under the recollection that Alice had on one occasion pushed aside the half-crown he had tendered, and it had required a ten shilling note to remove from her memory the thought of her "friend" with whom she had threatened him.

"I've been speaking about her to Martha this evening." The line of Mrs. Bindle's lips was still grim.

"I'm afraid she's a bad—not a good girl," amended Mr. Hearty. "I——"

"You don't push yourself forward enough," said Mrs. Bindle, her thoughts still on Mr. Coplestone's victory. "Look at Bindle. He knows a lord, and

look what he is." She precipitated into the last two words all the venom of years of disappointment. "And you've got three shops," she added inconsequently.

"I—I never had time to go out and about," stuttered Mr. Hearty, as if that explained the fact of his not possessing a lord among his acquaintance. His thoughts were still preoccupied with the Alice episode.

"You ought to, Mr. Hearty," said Mrs. Bindle with conviction. "You owe it to yourself and to what you've done."

"You see, Joseph is different," said Mr. Hearty, pursuing his own line of thought. "He——"

"Talks too much," said Mrs. Bindle with decision, filling in the blank inaccurately. "I tell him his fine friends only laugh up their sleeves at him. They should see him in his own home," she added.

For some moments there was silence, during which Mrs. Bindle sat, immobile as an Assyrian goddess, her eyes smouldering balefully.

"I should have liked to have trained the choir," he said, his mind returning to the cause of his disappointment.

"It's that Mr. Coplestone," said Mrs. Bindle with conviction. "I never liked him, with his foxy little ways. I never deal with him."

"I have always done what I could for the chapel, too," continued Mr. Hearty, not to be diverted from his main theme by reference to Mr. Coplestone's shortcomings.

"You've done too much, Mr. Hearty, that's what's

the matter," she cried with conviction, loyalty to her brother-in-law triumphing over all sense of Christian charity. "It's always the same. Look at Bindle," she added, unable to forget entirely her own domestic cross. "Think what I've done for him, and look at him."

"Last year I let them have all the fruit at cost price for the choir-outing," said Mr. Hearty; "but I'll never do it again," he added, the man in him triumphing over the martyr, "and I picked it all out myself."

"The more you do, the more you may do," said Mrs. Bindle oracularly.

Mr. Hearty's reference was to a custom prevailing among the worshippers at the Alton Road Chapel. It was an understood thing that, in placing orders, preference should always be given to members of the flock, who, on their part, undertook to supply their respective commodities at cost price. The object of this was to bring all festivities "within reach of our poorer brethren," as Mr. Sopley, a one-time minister, had expressed it when advocating the principle.

The result was hours of heart-searching for those entrusted with the feeding of the Faithful. Mr. Hearty, for instance, spent much time and thought in wrestling with figures and his conscience. He argued that "cost price" must allow for rent, rates and taxes; salaries, a knowledge of the cheapest markets (which he possessed) and interest on capital (his own).

By a curious coincidence, the actual figures came out very little above the ordinary retail price he was charging in his shops, which proved to him conclusively

that he was in no sense of the term a profiteer. As a matter of fact, it showed that he was under-charging.

Other members of the chapel seemed to arrive at practically the same result as Mr. Hearty, and by similar means.

As the " poorer brethren " had no voice in the fixing of these prices, and as everyone was too interested in his own figures to think of criticising those of others, the " poorer brethren " either paid, or stayed away.

" You ought to join the choir, Elizabeth." It was Mr. Hearty's thank-offering for sympathy.

" Oh, Mr. Hearty ! " she simpered. " I'm sure I couldn't sing well enough."

" You sing very nicely, Elizabeth. I have noticed it on Sunday evenings when you come round. You have a very good high soprano."

A quiver passed through Mrs. Bindle. She drew herself up, and her lips seemed to take on a softer line.

" I'm sure it's very good of you to say so," she responded gratefully.

" I shall still sing in the choir," said Mr. Hearty ; " but——"

A heavy pounding overhead caused him to start violently. It was Mrs. Hearty's curfew.

Mrs. Bindle rose and Mr. Hearty accompanied her to the street-door. Alice was in the passage, apparently on her way to bed.

" Good night, Mr. Hearty," said Mrs. Bindle.

" Good night, Elizabeth," and Mr. Hearty closed the door behind her.

She paused to open her umbrella, it was spotting

with rain and Mrs. Bindle was careful of her clothes.

Suddenly through the open transom she heard a surprised scream and the sound of scuffling.

"You beast," cried a feminine voice. "I'll tell missis, that I will."

And Mrs. Bindle turned and ran full-tilt into a policeman.

CHAPTER VI

MRS. BINDLE DEFENDS HER HOME

I

"GOSPEL bells, gospel bells, hm-hm-hm-hm-hm-hm-hm."

Mrs. Bindle accompanied her favourite hymn with bangs from the flat-iron as she strove to coax one of Bindle's shirts to smoothness.

She invariably worked to the tune of "Gospel Bells." Of the hymn itself she possessed two words, "gospel" and "bells"; but the tune was hers to the most insignificant semi-quaver, and an unlimited supply of "hms" did the rest.

Turning the shirt at the word "gospel," she brought the iron down full in the middle of what, judging from the power she put into the stroke, might have been Bindle's back.

"Bells," she sang with emphasis, and proceeded to trail off into the "hms."

With Mrs. Bindle, singing reflected her mood. When indignation or anger gripped her soul, "Gospel Bells" was rendered with a vigour that penetrated to Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney.

Then, as her mood mellowed, so would the tune

soften, almost dying away until, possibly, a stray thought of Bindle brought about a crescendo passage, capable of being developed into full forte, brass-wind and tympani.

After one of these full-throated passages, the thought of her brother-in-law, Mr. Hearty, mellowed the stream of melody passing through her thin, slightly parted lips.

It had reached an almost caressing softness, when a knock at the door caused her to stop suddenly A moment later, the iron was banged upon the rest, and she glanced down at her apron. To use her own phrase, she was the "pink of neatness."

Walking across the kitchen and along the short passage, she threw open the door with the air of one who was prepared to defend the sacred domestic hearth against all comers.

"I've come about the 'ouse, mum." A mild-looking little man with a dirty collar and a deprecating manner stood before her, sucking nervously at a hollow tooth, the squeak of which his friends had learned to live down.

"The house!" repeated Mrs. Bindle aggressively. "What house?"

"This 'ouse wot's to let, mum." The little man struggled to extract a newspaper from his pocket. "I'd like to take it," he added.

"Oh! you would, would you?" Mrs. Bindle eyed him with disfavour. "Well, it's not to let," and with that she banged the door in the little man's face,

just as his pocket gave up the struggle and released a soiled copy of *The Fulham Signal.*

He started back, the paper falling upon the tiled-path that led from the gate to the front-door.

For nearly a minute he stood staring at the door, as if not quite realising what had happened. Then, picking up the paper, he gazed at it with a puzzled expression, turned to a marked passage under the heading " Houses to Let," and read :

> HOUSE TO LET.—Four-roomed house to let in Fulham. Easy access to bus, tram and train. Rent 15/6 a week. Immediate possession. Apply to occupier, 7 Fenton Street, Fulham, S.W.

He looked at the number on the door, back again at the paper, then once more at the number. Apparently satisfied that there was no mistake, he knocked again, a feeble, half-hearted knock that testified to the tremors within him.

He had been graded C3 ; but he possessed a wife who was, physically, A1. It was the knowledge that she would demand an explanation if he failed to secure the house, after which she had sent him hot-foot, that inspired him with sufficient courage to make a second attempt to interview Mrs. Bindle.

With inward tremblings, he waited for the door to open again. As he stood, hoping against hope in his coward heart that the summons had not been heard, a big, heavily-hipped woman, in a dirty black-and-white foulard blouse, a draggled green skirt, and shapeless stays, slid through the gate and waddled up the path.

" So you got 'ere fust," she gasped, her flushed face showing that she had been hurrying. " Well, well, it can't be 'elped, I suppose, fust come fust served. I always says it and always shall."

The little man had swung round, and now stood blinking up at the new arrival, who entirely blocked his line of retreat.

" Knocked, 'ave you ? " she enquired, fanning her flushed face with a folded newspaper.

He nodded ; but his gaze was directed over her heaving shoulder at a man and woman, with a little girl between them, approaching from the opposite side of the way.

As the new arrivals entered the garden, the stout woman explained that " this gentleman " had already knocked.

" P'raps they ain't up yet," suggested the man with the little girl.

" Well, they ought to be," said the stout woman with conviction.

Another woman now joined the throng, her turned-up sleeves and the man's tweed cap on her head, kept in place by a long, amber-headed hatpin, testifying to the limited time she had bestowed upon her toilette.

" Is it took ? " she demanded of the woman with the little girl.

" Dunno ! " was the reply. " She ain't opened the door yet."

" She opened it once," said the little man.

" Wot she say ? "

"Said it wasn't to let, then banged it to in my face," was the injured response.

"'Ere, let me 'ave a try," cried the woman in the foulard blouse, as she grasped the knocker and proceeded to awaken the echoes of Fenton Street. Corple Street at one end and Bransdon Road at the other, were included in the sound-waves that emanated from the Bindles' knocker.

Several neighbours, including Mrs. Grimps and Mrs. Sawney, came to their doors and gazed at the collection of people that now entirely blocked the pathway of No. 7. Three other women had joined the throng, together with a rag-and-bone man in dilapidated clothing, accompanied by a donkey and cart.

"A shame I calls it, a-keepin' folks 'angin' about like this," said one of the new arrivals.

"P'raps it's let," said the rag-and-bone man.

"Well, why don't they say so?" snapped she with the tweed cap and hat-pin.

"'Ave another go, missis," suggested the man with the little girl. "I'm losin' 'alf a day over this."

Inspired by this advice, the big woman reached forward to seize the knocker. At that moment the door was wrenched open, and Mrs. Bindle appeared. She had removed her apron and brushed her thin, sandy hair, which was drawn back from her sharp, hatchet-like face so that not a hair wantoned from the restraining influence of the knot behind.

Grim, with indrawn lips and the light of battle in her eyes she glared, first at the little man with whom

she had already held parley, then at the woman in the foulard blouse.

At chapel, there was no more meek and docile "Daughter of the Lord" than Mrs. Bindle. To her, religion was an ever-ready help and sustenance; but there was something in her life that bulked even larger than her Faith, although she would have been the first to deny it. That thing was her Home.

In keeping the domestic temple of her hearth as she conceived it should be kept, Mrs. Bindle toiled ceaselessly. It was her fetish. She worshipped at chapel as a stepping-stone to post-mortem glory; but her home was the real altar at which she sacrificed.

As she gazed at the "rabble," as she mentally characterised it, littering the tiled-path of the front garden, which only that morning she had cleaned, the rage of David entered her heart; but she was a God-fearing woman who disliked violence—until it was absolutely necesssary.

"Was it you knocking?" she demanded of the big woman in the foulard blouse. Her voice was sharp as the edge of a razor; but restrained.

"That's right, my dear," replied the woman comfortably, "I come about the 'ouse."

"Oh! you have, have you?" cried Mrs. Bindle. "And are these your friends?" Her eyes for a moment left those of her antagonist and took in the queue which, by now, overflowed the path into the roadway.

"Look 'ere, I'll give you sixteen bob a week," broke

in the woman with the tweed cap and the hat-pin, instantly rendering herself an Ishmael.

" 'Ere, none o' that ! " cried an angry female voice. " Fair do's."

There was a murmur of approval from the others, which was interrupted by Mrs. Bindle's clear-cut, incisive voice.

" Get out of my garden, and be off, the lot of you," she cried, taking a half-step in the direction of the big woman, to whom she addressed herself.

" Is it let ? " enquired the rag-and-bone man from the rear.

" Is what let ? " demanded Mrs. Bindle.

" The 'ouse, mum," said the rag-and-bone man, whose profession demanded tact and politeness.

" This house is not to let," was the angry retort, " never was to let, and never will be to let till I'm gone. Now you just be off with you, or——" she paused.

" Or wot ? " demanded she of the tweed cap and hat-pin, desirous of rehabilitating herself with the others.

" I'll send for a policeman," was Mrs. Bindle's rejoinder. She still restrained her natural instincts in a vice-like self-control. Her hands shook slightly ; but not with fear. It was the trembling of the tigress preparing to spring.

" Then wot about this advert ? " cried the man with the little girl, extending the newspaper towards her.

" Yes, wot about it ? " demanded the woman in the foulard blouse, extending her paper in turn.

"There's no advertisement about this house," said Mrs. Bindle, ignoring the papers, "and you'd better go away. Pity you haven't got something better to do than to come disturbin' me in the midst of my ironin'," and with that she banged the door and disappeared.

A murmur of anger passed along the queue, anger which portended trouble.

"Nice way to treat people," said a little woman with a dirty face, a dingy black bonnet and a velvet dolman, to which portions of the original jet-trimming still despairingly adhered. "Some folks don't seem to know 'ow to be'ave."

There was another murmur of agreement.

"Kick the blinkin' door in," suggested a pacifist.

"I'd like to get at 'er with my nails," said a sharp-faced woman with a baby in her arms. "I know *'er* sort."

"Deserves to 'ave 'er stutterin' windows smashed, the stuck-up baggage!" cried another.

"'Ullo, look at all them people."

A big, puffy man with a person that rendered his boots invisible, guided the hand-cart he was pushing into the kerb in front of No. 7 Fenton Street. A pale, dispirited lad was harnessed to the vehicle by a dilapidated piece of much-knotted rope strung across his narrow chest. As the barrow came to a standstill, he allowed the rope to drop to the ground and, stepping out of the harness, he turned an apathetic and unspeculative eye towards the crowd.

The big man, whose clothing consisted of a shirt, a

pair of trousers and some braces, stood looking at the applicants for the altar of Mrs. Bindle's life. The crowd returned the stare with interest. The furniture piled upon the barrow caused them some anxiety. Was that the explanation of the unfriendly reception accorded them ?

" Now then, Charley, when you've done a-drinkin' in this bloomin' beauty-show, you can give me a 'and."

" 'Oo are you calling a beauty-show ? " demanded the woman in the dolman. " You ain't got much to talk about, with a stummick like yours."

" My mistake, missis," said the big man imperturbably. " Sorry I made you cry." Then, turning to Charley, he added : " If you 'adn't such a thick 'ead, Charley, you'd know it was a sugar queue. They're wearin' too much for a beauty-show. Now, then, over the top, my lad." He indicated the railings with a nod, the gateway was blocked.

With the leisurely movements of a fatalist, Charley moved his inconspicuous person towards the railings of No. 7, while the big man proceeded to untie the rope that bound a miscellaneous collection of household goods to the handcart, an operation which entirely absorbed the attention of the queue.

" You took it ? " interrogated the rag-and-bone man.

" Don't you worry, cocky," said the big man as he lifted from the barrow a cane-bottomed chair, through which somebody had evidently sat, and placed it on the pavement. " Once inside the garding and the

'ouse is mine. 'Ere, get on wiv it, Charley," he admonished the lad, who was standing by the kerb as if reluctant to trespass.

With unexpressive face, the boy turned and climbed the railings.

" Catch 'old," cried the man, thrusting into Charley's unwilling hands a dilapidated saucepan.

The boy tossed it on to the small flower-bed in the centre of the garden, where Mrs. Bindle was endeavouring to cultivate geraniums from slips supplied by a fellow-worshipper at the Alton Road Chapel. These geranium slips were the stars in the grey firmament of her life. She tended them assiduously, and always kept a jug of water just inside the parlour-window with which to discourage investigating cats. It was she too that had planted the lobelia-border.

The queue seemed hypnotised by the overwhelming personality of the big man. With the fatalism of despair they decided that the gods were against them, and that he really had achieved the success he claimed. They still lingered, as if instinct told them that dramatic moments were pending.

" I don't doubt but wot I'll be very comfortable," remarked the big man contentedly. " 'Ere, catch 'old, Charley," he cried, tossing the lad a colander, possessed of more holes than the manufacturer had ever dreamed of.

Charley turned too late, and the colander caught a geranium which, alone among its fellows, had shown a half-hearted tendency to bloom. That particular flower was Mrs. Bindle's ewe-lamb.

" Ain't 'e a knock-out ? " cried the big man, pausing for a moment to gaze at his offspring. " Don't take after 'is pa, and that's a fact," and he exposed three or four dark-brown stumps of teeth.

" P'raps you ain't 'is father," giggled a feminine voice at the end of the queue.

The big man turned in the direction from which the voice had come, stared stolidly at an inoffensive little man, who had " not guilty " written all over him, then, deliberately swinging round, he lifted a small wicker clothes-basket from the cart.

" 'Ere, catch it, Charley," he cried, and without waiting to assure himself of Charley's willingness or ability to do so, he pitched it over the railings.

Charley turned just in time to see the basket coming. He endeavoured to avoid it, tripped over the colander, and sat down in the centre of the geranium-bed, carrying riot and desolation with him.

" Ain't you a——" but Charley was never to know how he appeared to his father at that moment.

Observing that several heads were turned towards the front door, the eyes of the big man had instinctively followed their direction. It was what he saw there that had caused him to pause in describing his offspring.

Standing very still, her face deathly pale, with no sign of her lips beyond a thin, grey line, stood Mrs. Bindle, her eyes fixed upon the geranium-bed and the desolation reigning there. Her breath came in short jerks.

With an activity of which his previous movements

had given no indication, Charley climbed the railings to the comparative safety of the street.

Mrs. Bindle turned her gaze upon the big man.

" 'Ere, come along, let me get in," he cried, pushing his way through the crowd, which showed no inclination for resistance. The little man who had first arrived was already well outside, talking to the woman with the tweed cap and hat-pin, while she of the foulard blouse was edging down the path towards the gate. None showed the least desire to protest against the big man's claim to the house by right of conquest—and he passed on to his Waterloo.

" I taken this 'ouse," he cried, as he approached the grim figure on the doorstep. " Fifteen an' a kick a week, an' cheap at 'alf the price," he added jovially.

" 'Ere, get on wiv it, Charley," he called out over his shoulder.

Charley, however, stood gazing at his parent with a greater show of interest than he had hitherto manifested. He seemed instinctively to grasp the dramatic possibilities of the situation.

" Thought I'd bring the sticks wiv me, missis," said the man genially. " Nothink like makin' sure in these days." He stopped suddenly. Without a word, Mrs. Bindle had turned and disappeared into the house.

" May as well pay a deposit," he remarked, thrusting a dirty hand into his trouser pocket. He glanced over his shoulder and winked jocosely at the woman with the foulard blouse.

The next thing he knew was that Drama with a capital " D " had taken a hand in the game. The

crowd drew its breath with almost a sob of surprised expectancy.

Into Charley's vacant eyes there came a look of interest, and into the big man's mouth, just as he turned his head, there came a something that was wet and tasted odiously of carbolic.

He staggered back, his eyes bulging, as Mrs. Bindle, armed with a large mop, which she had taken the precaution to wet, stood regarding him like an avenging fury. Her eyes blazed, and her nostrils were distended like those of a frightened thoroughbred.

Before the big man had time to splutter his protests, she had swung round the mop and brought the handle down with a crack upon his bare, bald head. Then, once more swinging round to the business end of the mop, she drew back a step and charged.

The mop got the big man just beneath the chin. For a moment he stood on one leg, his arms extended, like the figure of Mercury on the Piccadily Circus fountain.

Mrs. Bindle gave another thrust to the mop, and down he went with a thud, his head coming with a sharp crack against the tiles of the path.

The crowd murmured its delight. Charley danced from one foot to the other, the expression on his face proving conclusively that the vacuous look with which he had arrived was merely a mask assumed for defensive purposes.

"Get up!"

Into these two words Mrs. Bindle precipitated an amount of feeling that thrilled the crowd. The big

man, however, lay prone, his eyes fixed in fear upon the end of the mop.

"Get up!" repeated Mrs. Bindle. "I'll teach you to come disturbing a respectable home. Look at my garden."

As he still made no attempt to move, she turned suddenly and doubled along the passage, reappearing a moment later with a pail of water with which she had been washing out the scullery. Without a moment's hesitation she emptied the contents over the recumbent figure of the big man. The house-cloth fell across his eyes, like a bandage, and the hearthstone took him full on the nose.

"Oo-er!"

That one act of Mrs. Bindle's had saved from entire annihilation the faith of a child. For the first time in his existence, Charley realised that there was a God of retribution.

Murmurs of approval came from the crowd.

"Give it to 'im, missis, 'e done it," shouted one. "It warn't the kid's fault, blinkin' 'Un."

"Dirty profiteer," cried the thin woman. "Look at 'is stummick," she added as if in support of her words.

"Get up!" Again Mrs. Bindle's hard, uninflected words sounded like the accents of destiny.

She accompanied her exhortation by a jab from the mop-end of her weapon directed at the centre of that portion of the big man's anatomy which had been advanced as proof of his profiteering propensities.

He raised himself a few inches; but Mrs. Bindle,

with all the inconsistency of a woman, dashed the mop once more in his face, and down went his head again with a crack.

"Charley!" he roared; but there was nothing of the Paladin about Charley. Between him and his father at that moment were eleven years of heavy-handed tyranny, and Charley remained on the safety-side of the railings.

"Get up! You great, hulkin' brute," cried Mrs. Bindle, reversing the mop and getting in a stroke at his solar-plexus which would have made her fame in pig-sticking.

"Grrrrumph!" The fat man's exclamation was involuntary.

"Get up, I tell you," she reiterated. "You fat, ugly son of Satan, you Beelzebub, you leper, you Judas, you——" she paused a moment in her search for the undesirables from Holy Writ. Then, with inspiration, she added—"Barabbas."

The man made another effort to rise; but Mrs. Bindle brought the end of the mop down upon his head with a crack that sounded like a pistol-shot.

The expression on Charley's face changed. The lower jaw lifted. The loose, vacuous mouth spread. Charley was grinning.

For a moment the man lay still. Mrs. Bindle was standing over him with the mop, a tense and righteously indignant St. George over a particularly evil dragon.

Suddenly he gave tongue.

"'Elp!" he yelled. "I'm bein' murdered. 'Elp! Charley, where are you?" But Charley's grin had

expanded and he was actually rubbing his hands with enjoyment.

Mrs. Bindle brought the mop down on the man's mouth. "Stop it, you blaspheming son o' Belial," she cried.

The big man roared the louder; but he made no effort to rise.

"'Ere comes a flatty," cried a voice.

"Slop's a-comin'," echoed another, and a minute later, a clean-shaven embodiment of youthful dignity and self-possession, in a helmet and blue uniform, approached and began to make his way through the crowd towards the Bindles' gate.

From the position in which he lay the big man, unable to see that assistance was at hand, continued to roar for help.

At the approach of this symbol of the law, Mrs. Bindle stepped back and brought her mop to the stand-at-ease position.

The policeman looked from one to the other, and then proceeded to ferret somewhere in the tails of his tunic, whence he produced a notebook. This was obviously a case requiring literary expression.

The big man, seeing Mrs. Bindle fall back, turned his head and caught a glimpse of the policeman. Very cautiously he raised himself to a sitting posture.

"She's been murderin' me," he said, with one eye fixed warily upon the mop. "'Ere, Charley!" he cried, looking over his left shoulder.

Charley reluctantly approached, regretful that law and order had triumphed over red revolution.

"Ain't she been tryin' to kill me?" demanded the big man of his offspring.

"Biffed 'im on the 'ead wiv the 'andle," corroborated the boy in a toneless voice.

"Poured water over me and 'it me in the stummick too, didn't she, Charley?" Once more the big man turned to his son for corroboration.

"Got 'im a rare 'un too!" agreed Charley, with a feeling in his voice that caused his father to look at him sharply. "Sloshed 'im on the jaw too," he added, as if finding pleasure in dwelling upon the sufferings of his parent.

"Do you wish to charge her?" asked the policeman in an official voice.

"'Charge me!'" broke in Mrs. Bindle. "'Charge me!' I should like to see 'im do it. See what 'e's done to my geraniums, bringing his filthy sticks into my front garden. 'Charge me!'" she repeated. "Just let him try it!" and she brought the mop to a position from which it could be launched at the big man's head.

Instinctively he sank down again on to the path, and the policeman interposed his body between the weapon and the vanquished.

"There's plenty of witnesses here to prove what he done," cried Mrs. Bindle shrilly.

Once more the big man raised himself to a sitting posture; but Mrs. Bindle had no intention of allowing him to control the situation. To her a policeman meant justice, and to this self-possessed lad in the uniform of unlimited authority she opened her heart and, at the same time, the vials of her wrath.

"'Ere was I ironin' in my kitchen when this rabble," she indicated the crowd with the handle of the mop, "descended upon me like the plague of locusts." To Mrs. Bindle, scriptural allusion was a necessity.

"They said they wanted to take my 'ouse. Said I'd told them it was to let, the perjured scum of Judas. Then *he* came along"—she pointed to her victim who was gingerly feeling the bump that Mrs. Bindle's mop had raised—"and threw all that dirty lumber into my garden, and—and——" Here her voice broke, for to Mrs. Bindle those geranium slips were very dear.

"You'd better get up."

At the policeman's words the big man rose heavily to his feet. For a moment he stood still, as if to make quite sure that no bones were broken. Then his hand went to his neck-cloth and he produced a piece of hearthstone which had, apparently, become detached from the parent slab.

"Threw bricks at me," he complained, holding out the piece of hearthstone to the policeman.

"Ananias!" came Mrs. Bindle's uncompromising retort.

"Do you want to charge her?" asked the policeman brusquely.

"Serves 'im jolly well right," cried the woman with the tweed cap and hat-pin, pushing her way in front of a big man who obstructed her view.

"Oughter be run-in 'isself," agreed a pallid woman with a shawl over her head.

"Look wot 'e done to 'er garding," mumbled the rag-and-bone man, pointing at the flower-bed with the air of one who has just made an important discovery.

"It's the likes of 'im wot makes strikes," commented the woman in the dolman. "Blinkin' profiteer."

"She's got pluck, any'ow," said a telephone mechanic, who had joined the crowd just before Charley's father had bent before the wind of Mrs. Bindle's displeasure. "Knocked 'im out in the first round. Regular George Carpenter," he added.

"You get them things out of my garden. If you don't I'll give you in charge."

The big man blinked, a puzzled expression creeping into his eyes. He looked at the policeman uncomprehendingly. This was an aspect of the case that had not, hitherto, struck him.

"Are they your things?" asked the policeman, intent upon disentangling the situation before proceeding to use the pencil, the point of which he was meditatively sucking.

Charley's father nodded. He was still thinking over Mrs. Bindle's remark. It seemed to open up disconcerting possibilities.

"Now then, what are you going to do?" demanded the policeman sternly. "Do you wish to make a charge?"

"I will," said Mrs. Bindle, "unless 'e takes 'is furniture away and pays for the damage to my flowers. I'll charge 'im, the great, 'ulking brute, attacking a

defenceless woman because he knows 'er 'usband's out."

"That's right, missis, you 'ave 'im quodded," called out the rag-and-bone man. "'E didn't ought to 'ave done that to your garding."

"Tryin' to swank us 'e'd taken the 'ouse," cried the woman with the tweed cap and hat-pin. "I see through 'im from the first, I did. There ain't many men wot can throw dust in my eyes," she added, looking eagerly round for a dissenting look.

"'Ullo, 'ullo!" cried a voice from the outskirts of the crowd. "Somebody givin' somethink away, or is it a fire? 'Ere, let me pass, I'm the cove wot pays the rent," and Bindle pushed his genial way through the crowd.

They made way without protest. The advent of the newcomer suggested further dramatic developments, possibly even a fight.

"'Ullo, Tichborne!" cried Bindle, catching sight of the big man. "Been scrappin'?"

The three protagonists in the drama turned, as if with relief, to face this new phase of the situation.

"'Oo's 'e?" enquired Bindle of the policeman, indicating the big man with a jerk of his thumb.

"He's been tryin' to murder me, and if you were a man, Joe Bindle, you'd kill 'im."

Bindle subjected the big man to an elaborate scrutiny. "Looks to me," he remarked drily, "as if someone's got in before me. Wot's 'appened?" He looked interrogatingly up at the policeman.

" 'Oly 'Orace," he cried suddenly, as he caught sight of the miscellaneous collection of furniture that lay about the geranium bed. " What's that little pawnshop a-doin' on our front garden ? "

With the aid of the rag-and-bone man and the woman with the tweed cap and hat-pin, the whole situation was explained and expounded to both Bindle and the policeman.

When he had heard everything, Bindle turned to the big man, who stood sulkily awaiting events.

" Now, look 'ere, cully," he said. " You didn't oughter start doin' them sort o' things with a figure like yours. When Mrs. B. gets 'old of a broom, or a mop, the safest thing to do is to draw in your solar-plexus an' run. It 'urts less. Now, speakin' as a Christian to a bloomin' 'eathen wot's done 'imself pretty well, judgin' from the size of 'is pinafore, you'd better send for the coachman, 'arness up that there dray o' yours, carry orf them bits o' sticks an' let bygones be bygones. Ain't that good advice ? " He turned to the policeman for corroboration.

There was a flicker of a smile at the corners of the policeman's mouth, which seemed not so very many years before to have been lisping baby language. He looked at the big man. It was not for him to advise.

" 'Ere, Charley, blaaarst you," cried the big man, pushing his way to the gate. He had decided that the dice had gone against him. " Get them things on to the blinkin' barrer, you stutterin' young pup. Wot the purple——"

"Here, that's enough of that," said a quiet, determined voice, and the soft lines of the policeman's face hardened.

"Wot she want to say it was to let for?" he grumbled as he loped towards the hand-cart.

"'Ere 'ave I come wiv all these things to take the blinkin' 'ouse, then there's all this ruddy fuss. Are you göin' to get over into that blinkin' garden and fetch out them stutterin' things, or must I chuck you over?"

The last remark was addressed to Charley, who, with a wary eye on his parent, had been watching events, hoping against hope that the policeman would manifest signs of aggression, and carry on the good work that Mrs. Bindle had begun.

Charley glanced interrogatingly at the policeman. Seeing in his eye no encouragement to mutiny, he sidled towards the gate, a watchful eye still on his father. A moment later he was engaged in handing the furniture over the railings.

After the man had deposited the colander, a tin-bath, and two saucepans in the barrow, he seemed suddenly smitten with an idea.

He tugged a soiled newspaper from his trouser pocket. Glancing at it, he walked over to where the policeman was engaged in moving on the crowd.

"Read that," he said, thrusting the paper under the officer's nose and pointing to a passage with a dirty forefinger. "Don't that say the blinkin' 'ouse is to let? You oughter run 'er in for false——" He paused. "For false——" he repeated.

With a motion of his hand, the policeman brushed aside the newspaper.

"Move along there, please. Don't block up the footpath," he said.

At length the barrow was laden.

The policeman stood by with the air of a man whose duty it is to see the thing through.

The crowd still loitered. They had even yet hopes of a breach of the peace.

The big man was reluctant to go without a final effort to rehabilitate himself. Once more he drew the paper from his pocket and approached the policeman.

"Wot she put that in for?" he demanded, indicating the advertisement.

Ignoring the remark, the policeman drew his note-book once more from his pocket.

"I shall want your name and address," he said with an official air.

"Wotjer want it for?"

"Now, then, come along," said the policeman, and the big man gave his name and address.

"Wot she do it for?" he repeated, "an' wot's going to 'appen to 'er for 'ittin' me in the stummick?"

"You'd better get along," said the policeman.

With a grumble in his throat, the big man placed himself between the shafts of the barrow and, having blasted Charley into action, moved off.

"Made a rare mess of the garding, ain't 'e?" remarked the rag-and-bone man to the woman with the tweed cap and the hat-pin.

"Blinkin' profiteer!" was her comment.

II

"It's all your fault. Look wot they done." Mrs. Bindle surveyed the desolation which, that morning, had been a garden.

The bed was trodden down, the geraniums broken, and the lobelia border showed big gaps in its blue and greenness.

"It's always the same with anything I 'ave," she continued. "You always spoil it."

"But it wasn't me," protested Bindle. "It was that big cove with the pinafore."

"Who put that advertisement in?" demanded Mrs. Bindle darkly. "That's what *I* should like to know."

"Somebody wot 'ad put the wrong number," suggested Bindle.

"I'd wrong number them if I caught them."

Suddenly she turned and made a bolt inside the house.

Bindle regarded the open door in surprise. A moment later his quick ears caught the sound of Mrs. Bindle's hysterical sobbing.

"Now ain't that jest like a woman?" was his comment. "She put 'im to sleep in the first round, an' still she ain't 'appy. Funny things, women," he added.

That evening as Mrs. Bindle closed the front door behind her on her way to the Wednesday temperance service, she turned her face to the garden; it had been in her mind all day.

She blinked incredulously. The lobelia seemed bluer than ever, and within the circular border was a veritable riot of flowering geraniums.

"It's that Bindle again," she muttered with indrawn lips as she turned towards the gate. "Pity he hasn't got something better to do with his money." Nevertheless she placed upon the supper-table an apple-tart that had been made for to-morrow's dinner, to which she added a cup of coffee, of which Bindle was particularly fond.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. BINDLE DEMANDS A HOLIDAY

I

"I SEE they're starting summer-camps." Mrs. Bindle looked up from reading the previous evening's paper. She was invariably twelve hours late with the world's news.

Bindle continued his breakfast. He was too absorbed in Mrs. Bindle's method of serving dried haddock with bubble-and-squeak to evince much interest in alien things.

"That's right," she continued after a pause, "don't you answer. Your ears are in your stomach. Pleasant companion you are. I might as well be on a desert island for all the company you are."

"If you wasn't such a damn good cook, Mrs. B., I might find time to say pretty things to you." It was only in relation to her own cooking that Bindle's conversational lapses passed without rebuke.

"There are to be camps for men, camps for women, and family camps," continued Mrs. Bindle without raising her eyes from the paper before her.

"Personally myself I says put me among the gals." The remark reached Mrs. Bindle through a mouthful

of haddock and bubble-and-squeak, plus a fish-bone.

"You don't deserve to have a decent home, the way you talk."

There were times when no answer, however gentle, was capable of turning aside Mrs. Bindle's wrath. On Sunday mornings in particular she found the burden of Bindle's transgressions weigh heavily upon her.

Bindle sucked contentedly at a hollow tooth. He was feeling generously inclined towards all humanity. Haddock, bubble-and-squeak, and his own philosophy enabled him to withstand the impact of Mrs. Bindle's most vigorous offensive.

"It's years since I had a holiday," she continued complainingly.

"It is, Mrs. B.," agreed Bindle, drawing his pipe from his coat pocket and proceeding to charge it from a small oblong tin box. "We ain't exactly wot you'd call an 'oneymoon couple, you an' me."

"The war's over."

"It is," he agreed.

"Then why can't we have a holiday?" she demanded, looking up aggressively from her paper.

"Now I asks you, Mrs. B.," he said, as he returned the tin box to his pocket, "can you see you an' me in a bell-tent, or paddlin', or playin' ring-a-ring-a-roses?" and he proceeded to light his pipe with the blissful air of a man who knows that it is Sunday, and that The Yellow Ostrich will open its hospitable doors a few hours hence.

"It says they're very comfortable," Mrs. Bindle continued, her eyes still glued to the paper.

"Wot is?"

"The tents."

"You ought to ask Ging wot a bell-tent's like, 'e'd sort o' surprise you. It's worse'n a wife, 'otter than religion, colder than a blue-ribboner. When it's 'ot it bakes you, when it's cold it lets you freeze, and when it's blowin' 'ell an' tinkers, it 'oofs it, an' leaves you with nothink on, a-blushin' like a curate 'avin' 'is first dip with the young women in the choir. That's wot a bell-tent is, Mrs. B. In the army they calls 'em 'ell-tents."

"Oh! don't talk to me," she snapped as she rose and proceeded to clear away the breakfast-things, during which she expressed the state of her feelings by the vigour with which she banged every utensil she handled. As she did so Bindle proceeded to explain and expound the salient characteristics of the army bell-tent.

"When you wants it to stand up," he continued, "it comes down, you bein' underneath. When you wants it to come down, nothing on earth'll move it, till you goes inside to 'ave a look round an' see wot's the trouble, then down it comes on top o' you. It's a game, that's wot it is," he added with conviction, "a game wot nobody ain't goin' to win but the tent."

"Go on talking, you're not hurting me," said Mrs. Bindle, with indrawn lower lip, as she brought down the teapot upon the dresser with a super bang.

"I've 'eard Ging talk o' twins, war, women, an' the beer-shortage; but to 'ear 'im at 'is best, you got to get 'im to talk about bell-tents."

"Everybody else has a holiday except me." Mrs. Bindle was not to be diverted from her subject. "Here am I, slavin' my fingers to the bone, inchin' and pinchin' to keep you in comfort, an' I can't 'ave a holiday. It's a shame, that's what it is, and it's all your fault." She paused in the act of wiping out the inside of the frying-pan, and stood before Bindle like an accusing fury. Anger always sullied the purity of her diction.

"Well, why don't you 'ave an 'oliday if you set yer 'eart on it? I ain't got nothink to say agin it." He continued to puff contentedly at his pipe, wondering what had become of the paper-boy. Bindle had become too inured to the lurid qualities of domesticity to allow them to perturb him.

"'Ow can I go alone?"

"You'd be safe enough."

"You beast!" Bindle was startled by the vindictiveness with which the words were uttered.

For a few minutes there was silence, punctuated by Mrs. Bindle's vigorous clearing away. Presently she passed over to the sink and turned on the tap.

"Nice thing for a married woman to go away alone," she hurled at Bindle over her shoulder, amidst the rushing of water.

"Well, take 'Earty," he suggested, with the air of a man anxious to find a way out of a difficulty.

"You're a dirty-minded beast," was the retort.

"An' this Sunday, too. Oh, naughty!"

"You never take me anywhere." Mrs. Bindle was not to be denied.

"I took you to church once," he said reminiscently.

"Why don't you take me out now?" she demanded, ignoring his remark.

"Well," he remarked, as he dug into the bowl of his pipe with a match-stick, "when you caught a bus, you don't go on a-runnin' after it, do you?"

"Why don't you get a week off and take me away?"

"Well, I'll think about it." Bindle rose and, picking up his hat, left the room, with the object of seeking the missing paper-boy.

The loneliness of her life was one of Mrs. Bindle's stock grievances. If she had been reminded of the Chinese proverb that to have friends you must deserve friends, she would have waxed scornful. Friends, she seemed to think, were a matter of luck, like a goose in a raffle, or a rich uncle.

"It's little enough pleasure I get," she would cry, in moments of passionate protest.

To this, Bindle would sometimes reply that "it's wantin' a thing wot makes you get it." Sometimes he would go on to elaborate the theory into the impossibility of "'avin' a thing for supper an' savin' it for breakfast."

By this, he meant to convey to Mrs. Bindle that she was too set on post-mortem joys to get the full flavour of those of this world.

Mrs. Bindle possessed the soul of a potential martyr. If she found she were enjoying herself, she would become convinced that, somewhere associated with it, must be Sin with a capital "S", unless of course the enjoyment were directly connected with the chapel.

She was fully convinced that it was wrong to be happy. Laughter inspired her with distrust, as laughter rose from carnal thoughts carnally expressed. She fought with a relentless courage the old Adam within herself, inspired always by the thought that her reward would come in another and a better world.

Her theology was that you must give up in this world all that your "carnal nature" cries out for, and your reward in the next world will be a sort of perpetual jamboree, where you will see the damned being boiled in oil, or nipped with red-hot pincers by little devils with curly tails. In this she had little to learn either from a Dante, or the Spanish Inquisition.

The Biblical descriptions of heaven she accepted in all their literalness. She expected golden streets and jewelled gates, wings of ineffable whiteness and harps of an inspired sweetness, the whole composed by an orchestra capable of playing without break or interval.

She insisted that the world was wicked, just as she insisted that it was miserable. She struggled hard to bring the light of salvation to Bindle, and she groaned in spirit at his obvious happiness, knowing that to be happy was to be damned.

To her, a soul was what a scalp is to the American

Indian. She strove to collect them, knowing that the believer who went to salvation with the greatest number of saved souls dangling at her girdle, would be thrice welcome, and thrice blessed.

In Bindle's case, however, she had to fall back upon the wheat that fell upon stony ground. With a cheerfulness that he made no effort to disguise, Bindle declined to be saved.

"Look 'ere, Lizzie," he would say cheerily. "Two 'arps is quite enough for one family and, as you and 'Earty are sure of 'em, you leave me alone."

One of Mrs. Bindle's principal complaints against Bindle was that he never took her out.

"You could take me out fast enough once," she would complain.

"But where'm I to take you?" cried Bindle. "You don't like the pictures, you won't go to the 'alls, and I can't stand that smelly little chapel of yours, listenin' to a cove wot tells you 'ow uncomfortable you're goin' to be when you're cold meat."

"You could take me for a walk, couldn't you?" demanded Mrs. Bindle.

"When I takes you round the 'ouses, you bully-rags me because I cheer-o's my pals, and if we passes a pub you makes pleasant little remarks about gin-palaces. Tell you wot it is, Mrs. B.," he remarked on one occasion, "you ain't good company, at least not in this world," he added.

"That's right, go on," Mrs. Bindle would conclude. "Why did you marry me?"

"There, Mrs. B.," he would reply, "you 'ave me beaten."

From the moment that Mrs. Bindle read of the Bishop of Fulham's Summer-Camps for Tired Workers, she became obsessed by the idea of a holiday in a summer-camp. She was one of the first to apply for the literature that was advertised as distributed free.

The evening-paper that Bindle brought home possessed a new interest for her.

"Anything about the summer-camps?" she would ask, interrupting Bindle in his study of the cricket and racing news, until at last he came to hate the very name of summer-camps and all they implied.

"That's the worst o' religion," he grumbled one night at The Yellow Ostrich; "it comes a-buttin' into your 'ome life, an' then there ain't no peace."

"I don't 'old wiv religion," growled Ginger.

"I ain't got nothink to say against religion *as* religion," Bindle had remarked; "but I bars summer-camps."

Mrs. Bindle, however, was packing. With all the care of a practised housewife, she first devoted herself to the necessary cooking-utensils. She packed and unpacked half-a-dozen times a day, always stowing away some article that, a few minutes later, she found she required.

Her conversation at meal-times was devoted exclusively to what they should take with them. She asked innumerable questions, none of which Bindle was able satisfactorily to answer. To him the bucolic life

was a closed book ; but he soon realised that a holiday at the Surrey Summer-Camp was inevitable.

" Wot am I to do in a summer-camp ? " he mumbled, one evening after supper. " I can drive an 'orse, if some one's leadin' it, an' I knows it's an 'en wot lays the eggs an' the cock wot makes an' ell of a row in the mornin', same as them ole 'orrors we used to 'ave ; but barrin' that, I'm done."

" That's right," broke in Mrs. Bindle, " try and spoil my pleasure, it's little enough I get."

" But wot are we goin' to do in the country ? " persisted Bindle with wrinkled forehead. " I don't like gardenin', an'——"

" Pity you don't," she snapped.

" Yes, it's a pity," he agreed ; " still, it's saved me an 'ell of a lot o' back-aches. But wot are we goin' to do in a summer-camp, that's wot I want to know."

" You'll be getting fresh air and—and you can watch the sunsets."

" But the sun ain't goin' to set all day," he persisted. " Besides, I can see the sunset from Putney Bridge, an' damn good sunsets too, for them as likes 'em. There ain't no need to go to a summer-camp to see a sunset."

" You can go on, you're not hurting me." Mrs. Bindle drew in her lips and sat looking straight in front of her, a grim figure of Christian patience.

" I can't milk a cow," Bindle continued disconsolately, reviewing his limitations. " I can't catch chickens, me with various veins in my legs, I 'ates the smell

o' pigs, an' I ain't good at weedin' gardens. Now I asks you, Mrs. B., wot use am I at a summer-camp? I'll only be a sort o' fly in the drippin'."

"You can enjoy yourself, I suppose, can't you?" she snapped.

"But 'ow?"

"Oh! don't talk to me. I'm sick and tired of your grumbling, with your don't like this, an' your don't like that. Pity you haven't something to grumble about."

"But I ain't——"

"There's many men would be glad to have a home like yours, an' chance it."

"Naughty!" cried Bindle, wagging an admonitory finger at her. "If I——"

"Stop it!" she cried, jumping up, and making a dash for the fire, which she proceeded to poke into extinction.

Meanwhile, Bindle had stopped it, seizing the opportunity whilst Mrs. Bindle was engaged with the fire, to slip out to The Yellow Ostrich.

II

"Looks a bit lonely, don't it?" Bindle gazed about him doubtfully.

"What did you expect in the country?" snapped Mrs. Bindle.

"Well, a tram or a bus would make it look more 'ome-like."

The Bindles were standing on the down platform of Boxton Station surrounded by their luggage. There was a Japanese basket bursting to reveal its contents, a large cardboard hat-box, a small leather bag without a handle and tied round the middle with string to reinforce a dubious fastening. There was a string-bag blatantly confessing to its heterogeneous contents, and a roll of blankets, through the centre of which poked Mrs. Bindle's second-best umbrella, with a travesty of a parrot's head for a handle.

There was a small deal box without a lid and marked "Tate's Sugar," and a frying-pan done up in newspaper, but still obviously a frying-pan. Finally there was a small tin-bath, full to overflowing, and covered by a faded maroon-coloured table-cover that had seen better days.

Bindle looked down ruefully at the litter of possessions that formed an oasis on a desert of platform.

"They ain't afraid of anythink 'appening 'ere," he remarked, as he looked about him. "Funny little 'ole, I calls it."

Mrs. Bindle was obviously troubled. She had been clearly told at the temporary offices of the Committee of the Summer-Camps for Tired Workers, that a cart met the train by which she and Bindle had travelled; yet nowhere was there a sign of life. Vainly in her own mind she strove to associate Bindle with the cause of their standing alone on a country railway-platform, surrounded by so uninviting a collection of luggage.

Presently an old man was observed leaving the distant signal-box and hobbling slowly towards them. When within a few yards of the Bindles, he halted and gazed doubtfully, first at them, then at the pile of their possessions. Finally he removed his cap of office as railway porter, and scratched his head dubiously.

"I missed un that time," he said at length, as he replaced his cap.

"Missed who?" enquired Bindle.

"The four-forty," replied the old man, stepping aside to get a better view of the luggage. "Got a-talkin' to Young Tom an' clean forgot un." It was clear that he regarded the episode in the light of a good joke. "Yours?" he queried a moment later, indicating with a jerk of his head the litter on the platform.

"Got it first time, grandpa," said Bindle cheerfully. "We come to start a pawnshop in these parts," he added.

The porter looked at Bindle with a puzzled expression, then his gaze wandered back to the luggage and finally on to Mrs. Bindle.

"We've come to join the Summer-Camp," she explained.

"The Summer-Camp!" repeated the man, "the Summer-Camp!" Then he suddenly broke into a breeze of chuckles. He looked from Mrs. Bindle to the luggage and from the luggage to Bindle, little gusts of throaty croaks eddying and flowing. Finally with a resounding smack he brought his hand down upon his fustian thigh.

"Well, I'm danged," he chuckled, "if that ain't a good un. I maun go an' tell Young Tom," and he turned preparatory to making off for the signal-box.

Bindle, however, by a swift movement barred his way.

"If it's as funny as all that, ole sport, wot's the matter with tellin' us all about it?"

Once more the old man stuttered off into a fugue of chuckles.

"Young Tom'll laugh over this, 'e will," he gasped; "'e'll split 'isself."

"I suppose they don't 'ave much to amuse 'em," said Bindle patiently. "Now then, wot's it all about?" he demanded.

"Wrong station," spluttered the ancient. Then a moment later he added, "You be wantin' West Boxton. Camp's there. Three mile away. There ain't another train stoppin' here to-night," he added.

Mrs. Bindle looked at Bindle. Her lips had disappeared; but she said nothing. The arrangements had been entirely in her hands, and it was she who had purchased the tickets.

"How far did you say it was?" she demanded of the porter in a tone that seemed, as if by magic, to dry up the fountain of his mirth.

"Three mile, mum," he replied, making a shuffling movement in the direction of where Young Tom stood beside his levers, all unconscious of the splendid joke that had come to cheer his solitude. Mrs. Bindle,

however, placed herself directly in his path, grim and determined. The man fell back a pace, casting an appealing look at Bindle.

"Where can we get a cart?" she demanded with the air of one who has taken an important decision.

The porter scratched his head through his cap and considered deeply, then with a sudden flank movement and a muttered, "I'll ask Young Tom," he shuffled off in the direction of the signal-box.

Bindle gazed dubiously at the pile of their possessions, and then at Mrs. Bindle.

"Three miles," he muttered. "You didn't ought to be trusted out with a young chap like me, Mrs. B.," he said reproachfully.

"That's enough, Bindle."

Without another word she stalked resolutely along the platform in the direction of the signal-box. The old porter happening to glance over his shoulder saw her coming, and broke into a shambling trot, determined to obtain the moral support of Young Tom before another encounter.

Drawing his pipe from his pocket, Bindle sank down upon the tin-bath, jumping up instantly, conscious that something had given way beneath him with a crack suggestive of broken crockery. Reseating himself upon the bundle of blankets, he proceeded to smoke contentedly. After all, something would happen, something always did.

Twenty minutes elapsed before Mrs. Bindle returned with the announcement that the signalman had telegraphed to West Boxton for a cart.

"Well, well," said Bindle philosophically, "it's turnin' out an 'appy day; but I could do with a drink."

An hour later a cart rumbled its noisy way up to the station, outside which stood the Bindles and their luggage. A business-like little boy scout slid off the tail.

"You want to go to the Camp?" he asked briskly.

"Well," began Bindle, "I can't say that I——"

"Yes," interrupted Mrs. Bindle, seeing in the boy scout her St. George; "we got out at the wrong station." She looked across at Bindle as she spoke, as if to indicate where lay the responsibility for the mistake.

"All right!" said the friend of all the world. "We'll soon get you there."

"An' who might you be, young-fellow-my-lad?" enquired Bindle.

"I'm Patrol-leader Smithers of the Bear Patrol," was the response.

"You don't say so," said Bindle. "Well, well, it's live an' learn, ain't it?"

"Now we'll get the luggage up," said Patrol-leader Smithers.

"'Ow 'Aig an' Foch must miss you," remarked Bindle as between them they hoisted up the tin-bath; but the lad was too intent upon the work on hand for persiflage.

A difficulty presented itself in how Mrs. Bindle was

to get into the cart. Her intense sensitiveness, coupled with the knowledge that there would be four strange pairs of male eyes watching her, constituted a serious obstacle. Young Tom, in whom was nothing of the spirit of Jack Cornwell, and his friend the old porter made no effort to disguise the fact that they were determined to see the drama through to the last fade-out.

Bindle's suggestion that he should " 'oist " her up, Mrs. Bindle had ignored, and she flatly refused to climb the spokes of the wheel. The step in front was nearly a yard from the ground, and Mrs. Bindle resented Young Tom's sandy leer.

It was Patrol-leader Smithers who eventually solved the problem by suggesting a dandy-chair, to which Mrs. Bindle reluctantly agreed. Accordingly Bindle and the porter crossed arms and clasped one another's wrists.

Mrs. Bindle took up a position with her back to the tail of the cart, and the two Sir Walters bent down, whilst Patrol-leader Smithers turned his back and, with great delicacy, strove to engage the fixed eye of Young Tom ; but without success.

" Now when I says 'eave—'eave," Bindle admonished the porter.

Gingerly Mrs. Bindle sat down upon their crossed hands.

" One, two, three—'eave ! " cried Bindle, and they heaved.

There was a loud guffaw from Young Tom, a stifled scream, and Mrs. Bindle was safely in the cart ; but

on her back, with the soles of her elastic-sided boots pointing to heaven. Bindle had under-estimated the thews of the porter.

"Right away!" cried Patrol-leader Smithers, feeling that prompt action alone could terminate so regrettable an incident, and he and Bindle clambered up into the cart, where Mrs. Bindle, having regained control of her movements, was angrily tucking her skirts about her.

The cart jerked forward, and Young Tom and his colleague grinned their valedictions, in their hearts the knowledge that they had just lived a crowded hour of glorious life.

The cart jolted its uneasy way along the dusty high-road, with Bindle beside the driver, Mrs. Bindle sitting on the blankets as grim as Destiny itself, engaged in working up a case against Bindle, and the boy scout watchful and silent, as behoves the leader of an enterprise.

Bindle soon discovered that conversationally the carter was limited to the "Aye" of agreement, varied in moments of unwonted enthusiasm with an "Oh, aye!"

At the end of half an hour's jolt, squeak, and crunch, the cart turned into a lane overhung by giant elms, where the sun-dried ruts were like miniature trenches.

"Better hold on," counselled the lad, as he made a clutch at the Japanese basket, which was in danger of going overboard. "It's a bit bumpy here."

"Fancy place in wet weather," murmured Bindle, as he held on with both hands. "So this is the Surrey Summer-Camp for Tired Workers," and he gazed about him curiously.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SUMMER CAMP FOR TIRED WORKERS

THE Surrey Summer-Camp for Tired Workers had been planned by the Bishop of Fulham out of the largeness of his heart and the plenitude of his inexperience in such undertakings. He had borrowed a meadow, acquired a cow, hired a marquee, and wangled fifty army bell-tents and a field-kitchen, about which in all probability questions would be asked in the House. Finally as the result of a brain-wave he had requisitioned the local boy scouts. Later there would be the devil to pay with the leaders of the Boys' Brigade; but the bishop abounded in tact.

When the time came, the meadow was there, the bell-tents, the cow, and the boy scouts duly arrived; but of the marquee nothing had been seen or heard, and as for the field-kitchen, the War Office could say little beyond the fact that it had left Aldershot.

For days the bishop worked indefatigably with telephone and telegraph, endeavouring to trace the errant field-kitchen and the missing marquee; but

so much of his time had been occupied in obtaining the necessary assistance to ensure that the cow was properly and punctually milked, that other things, being farther away, had seemed less insistent.

In those days the bishop had much to worry him ; but his real cross was Daisy, the cow. Everything else was of minor importance compared with this bovine responsibility. Vaguely he had felt that if you had a cow you had milk ; but he was to discover that on occasion a cow could be as unproductive of milk as a sea-serpent.

None of the campers had ever approached a cow in her professional capacity. Night and morning she had to be relieved of a twelve hours' accumulation of milk, all knew that ; but how ? That was a question which had perturbed bishop and campers alike ; for the whole camp shared the ecclesiastical anxiety about Daisy. Somewhere at the back of the cockney mind was the suspicion, amounting almost to a certainty, that, unless regularly milked, cows exploded, like overcharged water-mains.

Daisy soon developed into something more than a cow. When other occupations failed (amusements there were none), the campers would collect round Daisy, examining her from every angle. She was a mystery, just as a juggler or the three-card trick were mysteries, and as such she commanded respect.

Each night and morning the bishop had to produce from somewhere a person capable of ministering to the requirements of Daisy, and everyone in the neighbour-

hood was extremely busy. Apart from this, West Boxton was a hot-bed of Nonconformity, and some of the inhabitants were much exercised in their minds as to the spiritual effect upon a Dissenter of milking a church cow.

There were times when the bishop felt like a conjurer, billed to produce a guinea-pig from a top-hat, who had left the guinea-pig at home.

Daisy was not without her uses, quite apart from those for which she had been provided by Providence and the bishop. "Come an' 'ave a look at Daisy," had become the conversational forlorn hope of the campers when utterly bankrupt of all other interests. She was their shield against boredom and the spear with which to slay the dragon of apathy.

"No beer, no pictures, only a ruddy cow," a cynic had remarked in summing up the amusements provided by the Surrey Summer-Camp for Tired Workers. "Enough to give a giddy flea the blinkin' 'ump," he had concluded; but his was only an isolated view. For the most part these shipwrecked cockneys were grateful to Daisy, and they never tired of watching the milk spurt musically into the bright pail beneath her.

The bishop was well-meaning, but forgetful. In planning his camp he had entirely overlooked the difficulty of food and water supplies. The one was a mile distant and could not be brought nearer; the other had been overcome by laying a pipe, at considerable expense.

In the natural order of disaster the campers had

arrived, and in a very few hours became tinctured with the heresy of anti-clericalism. Husbands quarrelled with wives as to who should bear the responsibility for the adventure to which they found themselves committed. One and all questioned the right of a bishop to precipitate himself into the domestic circle as a bearer of discord and summer-camps.

At the time of the arrival of the Bindles, everything seemed chaos. There was a spatter of bell-tents on the face of the meadow, piles of personal possessions at the entrance of the tents, whilst the " tired workers " loitered about in their shirt sleeves, or strove to prepare meals in spite of the handicaps with which they were surrounded. The children stood about wide-eyed and grave, as if unable to play their urban games in a bucolic setting.

When, under the able command of Patrol-leader Smithers, the Bindles' belongings had been piled up just inside the meadow and Mrs. Bindle helped down, sore in body and disturbed in temper, the indefatigable boy scout led the way towards a tent. He carried the Japanese basket in one hand, and the handleless bag under the other arm, whilst Bindle followed with the tin-bath, and Mrs. Bindle made herself responsible for the bundle of blankets, through the centre of which the parrot-headed umbrella peeped out coyly.

Their guide paused at the entrance of a bell-tent, and deposited the Japanese basket on the ground.

" This is your tent," he announced, " I'll send one of the patrol to help you," and, with the air of one

upon whose shoulders rests the destiny of planets, he departed.

Bindle and Mrs. Bindle gazed after him, then at each other, finally at the tent. Bindle stepped across and put his head inside; but quickly withdrew it.

"Smells like a bus on a wet day," he muttered.

With an air of decision Mrs. Bindle entered the tent. As she did so Bindle winked gravely at a little boy who had wandered up, and now stood awaiting events with blue-eyed gravity. At Bindle's wink he turned and trotted off to a neighbouring tent, from the shelter of which he continued to watch the domestic tragedy of the new arrivals.

"There are no bedsteads." Mrs. Bindle's voice came from within the tent in tones of muffled tragedy.

"You don't say so," said Bindle abstractedly, his attention concentrated upon a diminutive knight of the pole, who was approaching their tent.

"Where's the feather beds, 'Orace?" he demanded when the lad was within ear-shot.

"There's a waterproof ground-sheet and we supply mattresses of loose straw," he announced as he halted sharply within two paces of where Bindle stood.

"Oh! you do, do you?" said Bindle, "an' who 'appens to supply the brass double-bedstead wot me and Mrs. B. is used to sleep on. P'raps you can tell me that, young shaver?"

Before the lad had time to reply, Mrs. Bindle appeared

at the entrance of the tent, grimmer and more uncompromising than ever. For a moment she eyed the lad severely.

"Where am I to sleep?" she demanded.

"Are you with this gentleman?" enquired the boy scout.

"She is, sonny," said Bindle, "been with me for twenty years now. Can't lose 'er no'ow."

"Bindle, behave yourself!" Mrs. Bindle's jaws closed with a snap.

"We're going to 'ave some sacks of straw in place of that missionary's bed you an' me sleeps on in Fulham," explained Bindle; but Mrs. Bindle had disappeared once more into the tent.

For the next hour the Bindles and their assistant scout were engaged in getting the bell-tent into habitable condition. During the process the scout explained that the marquee was to have been used for the communal meals, which the field-kitchen was to supply; but both had failed to arrive, and the bishop had himself gone up to London to make enquiries.

"An' wot's goin' to 'appen to us till 'e runs acrost 'em?" enquired Bindle. "I'm feelin' a bit peckish myself now—wot I'll be like in a hour's time I don't know."

"I'll show you how to build a scout-fire," volunteered the lad.

"But I ain't a fire-eater," objected Bindle. "I want a bit o' steak, or a rasher an' an egg."

"What's the use of a scout-fire to me with kippers

to cook?" demanded Mrs. Bindle, appearing once more at the entrance of the tent.

At that moment another "tired worker" drifted across to the Bindles' tent. He was a long, lean man with a straggling moustache and three days' growth of beard. He was in his shirt sleeves, collarless, with unbuttoned waistcoat, and he wore a general air of despondency and gloom.

"'Ow goes it, mate?" he enquired.

Bindle straightened himself from inspecting the interior of the tin-bath which he was unpacking.

"Oh! mid; but I've known wot it is to be 'appier," said Bindle, with a grin.

"Same 'ere," was the gloomy response.

"Things sort o' seem to 'ave gone wrong," suggested Bindle conversationally.

"That's right," said the man, rubbing the bristles of his chin with a meditative thumb.

"'Ow you gettin' on for grub?" asked Bindle.

The man shook his head lugubriously.

"What about a pub?"

"Mile away," gloomed the man.

"Gawd Almighty!" Bindle's exclamation was not concerned with the man's remark, but with something he extracted from the bath. "Well, I'm blowed," he muttered.

"'Ere, Lizzie," he called out.

Mrs. Bindle appeared at the entrance of the tent. Bindle held up an elastic-sided boot from which marmalade fell solemnly and reluctantly.

Then the flood-gates of Mrs. Bindle's wrath burst apart, and she poured down upon Bindle's head a deluge of reproach. He and he alone was responsible for all the disasters that had befallen them. He had done it on purpose because she wanted a holiday. He wasn't a husband, he was a blasphemer, an atheist, a cumberer of the earth, and all that was evil.

She was interrupted in her tirade by the approach of a little man with a round, bald, shiny head and a worried expression of countenance.

"D'yer know 'ow to milk a cow, mate?" he enquired of Bindle, apparently quite unconscious that he had precipitated himself into the midst of a domestic scene.

"Do I know 'ow to wot?" demanded Bindle, eyeing the man as if he had asked a most unusual question.

"There's a bloomin' cow over there and nobody can't milk 'er, an' the bishop's gone, and we wants our tea."

Bindle scratched his head through his cap, then, turning towards the tent into which Mrs. Bindle had once more disappeared, he called out:

"Hi, Lizzie, jer know 'ow to milk a cow?"

"Don't be beastly," came the reply from the tent.

"It ain't one of them cows," he called back, "it's a milk cow, an' 'ere's a cove wot wants 'is tea."

Mrs. Bindle appeared at the entrance of the tent, and surveyed the group of three men.

"How did you manage yesterday?" she demanded practically.

"A girl come over from the farm, missis," said the little man, "and she didn't 'arf make it milk."

"Hold your tongue," snapped Mrs. Bindle.

The man gazed at her in surprise.

"Why don't you get the same girl?" asked Mrs. Bindle.

"She says she's too busy. I 'ad a try myself," said the man, "only it was a washout."

"I'll 'ave a look at 'er," Bindle announced, and the three men moved off across the meadow, picking their way among the tents with their piles of bedding, blankets, and other impedimenta outside. All were getting ready for the night.

When Bindle reached Daisy, he found the problem had been solved by one of Mr. Timkins' farm-hands, who was busily at work, watched by an interested group of campers.

During the next half-hour, Bindle strolled about among the tents learning many things, foremost among which was that "the whole ruddy camp was a washout." The commissariat had failed badly, and the nearest drink was a mile away at The Trowel and Turtle. A great many things were said about the bishop and the organisers of the camp.

When he returned to the tent, he found Mrs. Bindle engaged in boiling water in a petrol-tin over a scout-fire. With the providence of a good housewife she had brought with her emergency supplies, and Bindle

was soon enjoying a meal comprised of kipper, tea and bread and margarine. When he had finished, he announced himself ready to face the terrors of the night.

"I can't say as I likes it," he remarked, as he stood at the entrance to the tent, struggling to undo his collar. "Seems to me sort o' draughty."

"That's right, go on," cried Mrs. Bindle, as she pushed past him. "What did you expect?"

"Well, since you asks me, I'm like those coves in religion wot expects nothink; but gets an 'ell of a lot."

"Don't blaspheme. It's Sunday to-morrow," was the rejoinder; but Bindle had strolled away to commune with the man with a stubbly chin and pessimistic soul.

"Do yer sleep well, mate?" he enquired, conversationally.

"Crikey! sleep is it? There ain't no blinkin' sleep in this 'ere ruddy camp."

"Wot's up?" enquired Bindle.

"Up!" was the lugubrious response. "Awake all last night, I was."

"Wot was you doin'?" queried Bindle with interest.

"Scratchin'!" was the savage retort.

"Scratchin'! Who was you scratchin'?"

"Who was I scratchin'? Who the 'ell should I be scratchin' but myself?" he demanded, his apathy momentarily falling from him. "I'd like to know where they got that blinkin' straw from wot they give

us to lie on. I done a bit o' scratchin' in the trenches ; but last night I 'adn't enough fingers, damn 'em."

Bindle whistled.

" Then," continued the man with gloomy gusto, " there's them ruddy chickens in the mornin', a-crowin' their guts out. Not a wink o' sleep after three for anybody," he added, with all the hatred of the cockney for farmyard sounds. " Oh ! it's an 'oliday, all right," he added with scathing sarcasm, " only it ain't ours."

" Seems like it," said Bindle drily, as he turned on his heel and made for his own tent.

That night, he realised to the full the iniquities of the man who had supplied the straw for the mattresses. By the sounds that came from the other side of the tent-pole, he gathered that Mrs. Bindle was similarly troubled.

Towards dawn, Bindle began to doze, just as the cocks were announcing the coming of the sun. If the man with the stubbly chin were right in his diagnosis, the birds, like Prometheus, had, during the night, renewed their missing organisms.

" Well, I'm blowed ! " muttered Bindle. " Ole six-foot-o'-melancholy wasn't swinging the lead neither. 'Oly ointment ! I never 'eard such a row in all my puff. There ain't no doubt but wot Mrs. Bindle's gettin' a country 'oliday," and with that he rose and proceeded to draw on his trousers, deciding that it was folly to attempt further to seek sleep.

Outside the tent, he came across Patrol-leader Smithers.

"Mornin' Foch," said Bindle.

"Smithers," said the lad. "Patrol-leader Smithers of the Bear Patrol."

"My mistake," said Bindle; "but you an' Foch is jest as like as two peas. You don't 'appen to 'ave seen a stray cock about, do you?"

"A cock," repeated the boy.

"Yes!" said Bindle, tilting his head on one side with the air of one listening intently, whilst from all sides came the brazen blare of ecstatic chanticleers. "I thought I 'eard one just now."

"They're Farmer Timkins' fowls," said Patrol-leader Smithers gravely.

"You don't say so," said Bindle. "Seem to be in good song this mornin'. Reg'lar bunch o' canaries."

To this flippancy, Patrol-leader Smithers made no response.

"Does there 'appen to be any place where I can get a rinse, 'Indenberg?" he enquired.

"There's a tap over there for men," said Patrol-leader Smithers, pointing to the extreme right of the field, "and for ladies over there," he pointed in the opposite direction.

"No mixed bathin', I see," murmured Bindle. "Now, as man to man, Ludendorff, which would you advise?"

The lad looked at him with grave eyes. "The men's tap is over there," and again he pointed.

"Well, well," said Bindle, "p'raps you're right; but I ain't fond o' takin' a bath in the middle of a field," he muttered.

"The taps are screened off."

"Well, well, live an' learn," muttered Bindle, as he made for the men's tap.

When Bindle returned to the tent, he found Patrol-leader Smithers instructing Mrs. Bindle in how to coax a scout-fire into activity.

"You mustn't poke it, mum," said the lad. "It goes out if you do."

Mrs. Bindle drew in her lips, and folded the brown mackintosh she was wearing more closely about her. She was not accustomed to criticism, particularly in domestic matters, and her instinct was to disregard it; but the boy's earnestness seemed to discourage retort, and she had already seen the evil effect of attacking a scout-fire with a poker.

Suddenly her eye fell upon Bindle, standing in shirt and trousers, from the back of which his braces dangled despondently.

"Why don't you go in and dress?" she demanded. "Walking about in that state!"

"I been to get a rinse," he explained, as he walked across to the tent and disappeared through the aperture.

Mrs. Bindle snorted angrily. She had experienced a bad night, added to which the fire had resented her onslaught by incontinently going out, necessitating an appeal to a mere child.

Having assumed a collar, a coat and waistcoat,

Bindle strolled round the camp exchanging a word here and a word there with his fellow campers, who, in an atmosphere of intense profanity, were engaged in getting breakfast.

"Never 'eard such language," muttered Bindle with a grin. "This 'ere little camp'll send a rare lot o' people to a place where they won't meet the bishop."

At the end of half-an-hour he returned and found tea, eggs and bacon, and Mrs. Bindle waiting for him.

"So you've come at last," she snapped, as he seated himself on a wooden box.

"Got it this time," he replied genially, sniffing the air appreciatively. "'Ope you got somethink nice for yer little love-bird."

"Don't you love-bird me," cried Mrs. Bindle, who had been looking for some one on whom to vent her displeasure. "I suppose you're going to leave me to do all the work while you go gallivanting about playing the gentleman."

"I don't needs to play it, Mrs. B., I'm IT. Vere de Vere with blood as blue as 'Earty's stories."

"If you think I'm going to moil and toil and cook for you down here as I do at home, you're mistaken. I came for a rest. I've hardly had a wink of sleep all night," she sniffed ominously.

"I thought I 'eard you on the 'unt," said Bindle sympathetically.

"Bindle!" There was warning in her tone.

"But wasn't you?" He looked across at her in surprise, his mouth full of eggs and bacon.

"I—I had a disturbed night," she drew in her lips primly.

"So did I," said Bindle gloomily. "I'd 'ave disturbed 'em if I could 'ave caught 'em. My God! There must 'ave been millions of 'em," he added reminiscently.

"If you're going to talk like that, I shall go away," she announced.

"I'd like to meet the cove wot filled them mattresses," was Bindle's sinister comment.

"It—it wasn't that," said Mrs. Bindle. "It was the——" She paused for a moment.

"Them cocks," he suggested.

"Don't be disgusting, Bindle."

"Disgusting? I never see such a chap as me for bein' lood an' disgustin' an' blasphemious. Wot jer call 'em if they ain't cocks?"

"They're roosters—the male birds."

"But they wasn't roostin', blow 'em. They was crowin', like giddy-o."

Mrs. Bindle made no comment; but continued to eat her breakfast.

"Personally, myself, I'm goin' to 'ave a little word with the bishop about that little game I 'ad with wot 'appened before wot you call them male birds started givin' tongue." He paused to take breath. "I don't like to mention wot it was; but I shall itch for a month. 'Ullo Weary!" he called out to the long man with the stubbly chin.

The man approached. He was wearing the same lugubrious look and the same waistcoat, unbuttoned in just the same manner that it had been unbuttoned the day before.

"You was right about them mattresses and the male birds," said Bindle, with a glance at Mrs. Bindle.

"The wot?" demanded the man, gazing vacantly at Bindle.

"The male birds."

"'Oo the 'ell—sorry, mum," to Mrs. Bindle. Then turning once more to Bindle he added, "Them cocks, you mean?"

"'Ush!" said Bindle. "They aint cocks 'ere, they're male birds, an' roosters on Sunday. You see, my missis——" but Mrs. Bindle had risen and, with angry eyes, had disappeared into the tent.

"Got one of 'em?" queried Bindle, jerking his thumb in the direction of the aperture of the tent.

The man with the stubbly chin nodded dolefully.

"Thought so," said Bindle. "You looks it."

Whilst Bindle was strolling round the camp with the man with the stubbly chin, Mrs. Bindle was becoming better acquainted with the peculiar temperament of a bell-tent. She had already realised its disadvantages as a dressing-room. It was dark, it was small, it was stuffy. The two mattresses occupied practically the whole floor-space and there was nowhere to sit. It was impossible to move about freely,

owing to the restrictions of space in the upper area.

Having washed the breakfast-things, peeled the potatoes, supplied by Mr. Timkins through Patrol-leader Smithers, and prepared for the oven a small joint of beef she had brought with her, Mrs. Bindle once more withdrew into the tent.

When she eventually re-appeared in brown alpaca with a bonnet to match, upon which rested two purple pansies, Bindle had just returned from what he called "a nose round," during which he had made friends with most of the campers, men, women and children, who were not already his friends.

At the sight of Mrs. Bindle he whistled softly.

"You can show me where the bakers is," she said icily, as she proceeded to draw on a pair of brown kid gloves. The inconveniences arising from dressing in a bell-tent had sorely ruffled her temper.

"The bakers!" he repeated stupidly.

"Yes, the bakers," she repeated. "I suppose you don't want to eat your dinner raw."

Then Bindle strove to explain the composite tragedy of the missing field-kitchen and marquee, to say nothing of the bishop.

In small communities news travels quickly, and the Bindles soon found themselves the centre of a group of men and women (with children holding a watching brief), all anxious to volunteer information, mainly on the subject of misguided bishops who got unsuspecting townsmen into the country under false pretences.

Mrs. Bindle was a good housewife, and she had come prepared with rations sufficient for the first two days. She had, however, depended upon the statements contained in the prospectus of the S.C.T.W., that cooking facilities would be provided by the committee.

She strove to control the anger that was rising within her. It was the Sabbath, and she was among strangers.

Although ready and willing to volunteer information, the other campers saw no reason to restrain their surprise and disapproval of Mrs. Bindle's toilette. The other women were in their work-a-day attire, as befitted housewives who had dinners to cook under severe handicaps, and they resented what they regarded as a new-comer's " swank."

That first day of the holiday, for which she had fought with such grim determination, lived long in Mrs. Bindle's memory. Dinner she contrived with the aid of the frying-pan and the saucepan she had brought with her. It would have taken something more than the absence of a field-kitchen to prevent Mrs. Bindle from doing what she regarded as her domestic duty.

The full sense of her tragedy, however, manifested itself when, dinner over, she had washed-up.

There was nothing to do until tea-time. Bindle had disappeared with the man with the stubbly chin and two others in search of the nearest public-house, a mile away. Patrol-leader Smithers was at Sunday-school, whilst her fellow-campers showed no inclination to make advances.

She walked for a little among the other tents; but her general demeanour was not conducive to hasty friendships. She therefore returned to the tent and wrote to Mr. Hearty, telling him, on the authority of Patrol-leader Smithers, that Mr. Timkins had a large quantity of excellent strawberries for sale.

Mr. Hearty was a greengrocer who had one eye on business and the other eye on God, in case of accidents. On hearing that the Bindles were going into the country, his mind had instinctively flown to fruit and vegetables. He had asked Mrs. Bindle to "drop him a postcard" (Mr. Hearty was always economical in the matter of postages, even other people's postages) if she heard of anything that she thought might interest him.

Mrs. Bindle told in glowing terms the story of Farmer Timkins' hoards of strawberries, giving the impression that he was at a loss what to do with them.

Three o'clock brought the bishop and a short open-air service, which was attended by the entire band of campers, with the exception of Bindle and his companions.

The bishop was full of apologies for the past and hope for the future. In place of a sermon he gave an almost jovial address; but there were no answering smiles. Everyone was wondering what they could do until it was time for bed, the more imaginative going still further and speculating what they were to do when they got there.

"My friends," the bishop concluded, "we must not

allow trifling mishaps to discourage us. We are here to enjoy ourselves."

And the campers returned to their tents as Achilles had done a few thousand years before, dark of brow and gloomy of heart.

CHAPTER IX

MR. HEARTY ENCOUNTERS A BULL

I

"HE'S sure to lose his way across the fields," cried Mrs. Bindle angrily.

"'Earty's too careful to lose anythink," said Bindle, as, from a small tin box, he crammed tobacco into his pipe. "'E's used to the narrow way 'e is," he added.

"You ought to have gone to meet him."

"My legs is feelin' a bit tired——" began Bindle, who enjoyed his brother-in-law's society only when there were others to enjoy it with him.

"Bother your legs," she snapped.

"Supposin' you 'ad various veins in your legs."

"Don't be nasty."

"Well, wot jer want to talk about my legs for, if I mustn't talk about yours," he grumbled.

"You've got a lewd mind, Bindle," she retorted, "and you know it."

"Well, any'ow, I ain't got lood legs."

She drew in her lips; but said nothing.

"I don't know wot 'Earty wants to come down to a funny little 'ole like this for," grumbled Bindle, as

they walked across the meadow adjoining the camping-ground, making for a spot that would give them a view of the field-path leading to the station.

"It's because he wants to buy some fruit."

"I thought there was somethink at the back of the old bird's mind," he remarked. "'Earty ain't one to spend railway fares jest for the love o' seein' you an' me, Mrs. B. It's apples 'e's after—reg'lar old Adam 'e is. You only got to watch 'im with them gals in the choir."

"If you talk like that I shall leave you," she cried angrily; "and it's strawberries, apples aren't in yet," she added, as if that were a circumstance in Mr. Hearty's favour.

Mr. Hearty had proved himself to be a man of action. Mrs. Bindle's glowing account of vast stores of strawberries, to be had almost for the asking, had torn from him a telegram announcing that he would be at the Summer-Camp for Tired Workers soon after two o'clock that, Monday, afternoon.

Mrs. Bindle was almost genial at the prospect of seeing her brother-in-law, and earning his thanks for assistance rendered. Conditions at the camp remained unchanged. After the service on the previous day, the bishop had once more disappeared, ostensibly in pursuit of the errant field-kitchen and marquee, promising to return early the following afternoon.

Arrived at the gate on the further side of the field, Bindle paused. Then, as Mrs. Bindle refused his suggestion that he should "'oist" her up, he himself climbed on to the top-rail and sat contentedly smoking.

"I don't seem to see 'Earty a-walkin' across a field," he remarked meditatively. "It don't seem natural."

"You can't see anything but what's in your own wicked mind," she retorted acidly.

"Well, well!" he said philosophically. "P'raps you're right. I suppose we shall see them merry whiskers of 'is a-comin' round the corner, 'im a-leadin' a lamb with a pink ribbon. I can see 'Earty with a little lamb, an' a sprig o' mint for the sauce."

For nearly a quarter of an hour Bindle smoked in silence, whilst Mrs. Bindle stood with eyes fixed upon a stile on the opposite side of the field, over which Mr. Hearty was due to come.

"What was that?"

Involuntarily she clutched Bindle's knee, as a tremendous roar broke the stillness of the summer afternoon.

"That's ole Farmer Timkins' bull," explained Bindle. "Rare ole sport, 'e is. Tossed a cove last week, an' made a rare mess of 'im."

"It oughtn't to be allowed."

"Wot?"

"Dangerous animals like that," was the retort.

"Well, personally myself, I likes a cut o' veal," Bindle remarked, watching Mrs. Bindle covertly; but her thoughts were intent on Mr. Hearty, and the allusion passed unnoticed.

"It 'ud be a bad thing for ole 'Earty, if that bull was to get 'im by the back o' the trousers," mused Bindle. "'Ullo, there 'e is." He indicated with the stem of his pipe a point in the hedge on the right of

the field, over which was thrust a great dun-coloured head.

Again the terrifying roar split the air. Instinctively Mrs. Bindle recoiled, and gripped the parrot-headed umbrella she was carrying.

"It's trying to get through. I'm not going to wait here," she announced with decision. "It may——"

"Don't you worry, Mrs. B.," he reassured her. "'E ain't one o' the jumpin' sort. Besides, there's an 'edge between 'im an' us, not to speak o' this 'ere gate."

Mrs. Bindle retired a yard or two, her eyes still on the dun-coloured head.

So absorbed were she and Bindle in watching the bull, that neither of them saw Mr. Hearty climbing the opposite stile.

As he stood on the topmost step, silhouetted against the blue sky, the tails of his frock-coat flapping, Bindle caught sight of him.

"'Ullo, 'ere's old 'Earty!" he cried, waving his hand.

Mr. Hearty descended gingerly to terra firma, then, seeing Mrs. Bindle, he raised his semi-clerical felt hat. In such matters, Mr. Hearty was extremely punctilious.

At that moment the bull appeared to catch sight of the figure with the flapping coat-tails.

It made a tremendous onslaught upon the hedge, and there was a sound of crackling branches; but the hedge held.

"Call out to him, Bindle. Shout! Warn him! Do you hear?" cried Mrs. Bindle excitedly.

" 'E's all right," said Bindle complacently. " That there bull ain't a-goin' to get through an 'edge like that."

" Mr. Hearty, there's a bull ! Run ! "

Mrs. Bindle's thin voice entirely failed to carry to where Mr. Hearty was walking with dignity and unconcern, regardless of the danger which Mrs. Bindle foresaw threatened him.

The bull made another attack upon the hedge. Mr. Hearty's flapping coat-tails seemed to goad it to madness. There was a further crackling and the massive shoulders of the animal now became visible ; but still it was unable to break through.

" Call out to him, Bindle. He'll be killed, and it'll be your fault," she cried hysterically, pale and trembling with anxiety.

" Look out, 'Earty ! " yelled Bindle. " There's a bloomin' bull," and he pointed in the direction of the hedge ; but the bull had disappeared.

Mr. Hearty looked towards the point indicated ; but, seeing nothing, continued his dignified way, convinced that Bindle was once more indulging in what Mr. Hearty had been known to describe as " his untimely jests."

He was within some fifty yards of the gate where the Bindles awaited him, when there was a terrific crash followed by a mighty roar—the bull was through. It had retreated apparently in order to charge the hedge and break through by virtue of its mighty bulk.

Bindle yelled, Mrs. Bindle screamed, and Mr. Hearty

gave one wild look over his shoulder and, with terror in his eyes and his semi-clerical hat streaming behind, attached only by a hat-guard, he ran as he had never run before.

Bindle clambered down from the gate so as to leave the way clear, and Mrs. Bindle thrust her umbrella into Bindle's hands. She had always been told that no bull would charge an open umbrella.

"Come on, 'Earty!" yelled Bindle. "Run like 'ell!" In his excitement he squatted down on his haunches, for all the world like a man encouraging a whippet.

Mr. Hearty ran, and the bull, head down and with a snorting noise that struck terror to the heart of the fugitive, ran also.

"Run, Mr. Hearty, run!" screamed Mrs. Bindle again.

The bull was running diagonally in the direction of Mr. Hearty's fleeing figure. In this it was at a disadvantage.

"Get ready to help him over," cried Mrs. Bindle, terror clutching at her heart.

"Looks to me as if 'Earty and the bull and the whole bloomin' caboodle'll come over together," muttered Bindle.

"Oooooh!"

A new possibility seemed to strike Mrs. Bindle and, with a terrified look at the approaching bull, which at that moment gave utterance to a super-roar, she turned and fled for the gate on the opposite side of the field.

For a second Bindle tore his gaze from the drama before him. He caught sight of several inches of white leg above a pair of elastic-sided boots, out of which dangled black and orange tabs.

"Help, Joseph, help!" Mr. Hearty screamed in his terror and, a second later, he crashed against the gate on which Bindle had climbed ready to haul him over.

Seizing his brother-in-law by the collar and a mercifully slack pair of trousers, he gave him a mighty heave. A moment later, the two fell to the ground; but on the right side of the gate. As they did so, the bull crashed his head against it.

The whole structure shivered. For a moment Bindle gave himself up for lost; but, fortunately, the posts held. The enraged animal could do nothing more than thrust its muzzle between the bars of the gate and snort its fury.

The foaming mouth and evil-looking blood-shot eyes caused Bindle to scramble hastily to his feet.

"Oh God! I am a miserable sinner," wailed Mr. Hearty; "but spare me that I may repent." Then he fell to moaning, whilst Bindle caught a vision of Mrs. Bindle disappearing over the further gate with a startling exposure of white stocking.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered. "Ain't it funny 'ow religion gets into the legs when there's a bull about? Bit of a slump in 'arps, if you was to ask me!"

For some seconds he stood gazing down on the grovelling form of Mr. Hearty, an anxious eye on the

bull which, with angry snorts, was battering the gate in a manner that caused him some concern.

" Look 'ere, 'Earty, you'd better nip orf," he said at length, bringing his boot gently into contact with a prominent portion of the greengrocer's prostrate form. Mr. Hearty merely groaned and muttered appeals to the Almighty to save him.

" It ain't no use a-kickin' up all that row," Bindle continued. " This 'ere bit o' beef seems to 'ave taken a fancy to you, 'Earty, an' that there gate ain't none too strong, neither. 'Ere, steady Kayser," he admonished, as the bull made a vicious dash with its head against the gate.

Mr. Hearty sat up and gave a wild look about him. At the sight of the blood-shot eyes of the enraged animal he scrambled to his feet.

" Now you make a bolt for that there stile," said Bindle, jerking his thumb in the direction where Mrs. Bindle had just disappeared, " and you'll find Mrs. B. somewhere on the other side."

With another apprehensive glance at the bull, Mr. Hearty turned and made towards the stile. His pace was strangely suggestive of a man cheating in a walking-race.

The sight of his quarry escaping seemed still further to enrage the bull. With a terrifying roar it dashed furiously at the gate.

The sound of the roar lent wings to the feet of the flying Mr. Hearty. Throwing aside all pretence, he made precipitately towards the stile, beyond which lay safety. For a few seconds, Bindle stood watching

the flying figure of his brother-in-law. Then he turned off to the right, along the hedge dividing the meadow from the field occupied by the bull.

"Well, 'ere's victory or Westminster Abbey," he muttered as he crept through a hole in the hawthorn, hoping that the bull would not observe him. His object was to warn the farmer of the animal's escape.

Half an hour later, he climbed the stile over which Mrs. Bindle had disappeared; but there was no sign either of her or of Mr. Hearty.

It was not until he reached the Summer-Camp that he found them seated outside the Bindles' tent. Mr. Hearty, looking pasty of feature, was endeavouring to convey to his blanched lips a cup of tea that Mrs. Bindle had just handed to him; but the trembling of his hand caused it to slop over the side of the cup on to his trousers.

"'Ullo, 'ere we are again," cried Bindle cheerily.

"I wonder you aren't ashamed of yourself," cried Mrs. Bindle.

Bindle stared at her with a puzzled expression. He looked at Mr. Hearty, then back again at Mrs. Bindle.

"Leaving Mr. Hearty and me like that. We might have been killed." Her voice shook.

"That would 'ave been a short cut to 'arps an' wings."

"I'm ashamed of you, that I am," she continued, while Mr. Hearty turned upon his brother-in-law a pair of mildly reproachful eyes.

" Well, I'm blowed," muttered Bindle as he walked away. " If them two ain't IT. *Me* a-leavin' *them.* If that ain't a juicy bit."

Mr. Hearty was only half-way through his second cup of tea when the Bishop of Fulham, followed by several of the summer-campers, appeared and walked briskly towards them.

" Where's that husband of yours, Mrs. Bindle ? " he enquired, as if he suspected Bindle of hiding from him.

" I'm sure I don't know, sir," she cried, rising, whilst Mr. Hearty, in following suit, stepped upon the tails of his coat and slopped the rest of the tea over his trousers.

" Ah," said the bishop. " I must find him. He's a fine fellow, crossing the field behind that bull to warn Mr. Timkins. If the beast had happened to get into the camp, it would have been the very—very disastrous," he corrected himself, and with a nod he passed on, followed by the other campers.

" That's just like Bindle," she complained, " not saying a word, and making me ridiculous before the bishop. He's always treating me like that," and there was a whimper in her voice.

" It's—it's very unfortunate," said Mr. Hearty nervously.

" Thank you, Mr. Hearty," she said. " It's little enough sympathy I get."

II

It was not until nearly four o'clock that Bindle reappeared with the intimation that he was ready to conduct Mr. Hearty to call upon Farmer Timkins with regard to the strawberries, the purchase of which had been the object of Mr. Hearty's visit.

"Won't you come, too, Elizabeth?" enquired Mr. Hearty, turning to Mrs. Bindle.

"Thank you, Mr. Hearty, I should like to," she replied, tightening her bonnet strings as if in anticipation of further violent movement.

Mr. Hearty gave the invitation more as a precaution against Bindle's high-spirits, than from a desire for his sister-in-law's company.

"'Ere, not that way," cried Bindle, as they were making for the gate leading to the road.

Mr. Hearty looked hesitatingly at Mrs. Bindle, who, however, settled the question by marching resolutely towards the gate.

"But it'll take a quarter of an hour that way," Bindle protested.

"If you think I'm going across any more fields with wild bulls, Bindle, you're mistaken," she announced with decision. "You've nearly killed Mr. Hearty once to-day. Let that be enough."

With a feeling of thankfulness Mr. Hearty followed.

"But that little bit o' beef is tied up with a ring

through 'is bloomin' nose. I been an' 'ad a look at 'im."

"Ring or no ring," she snapped, "I'll have you know that I'm not going across any more fields. It's a mercy we're either of us alive."

Bindle knew that he was not the other one referred to, and he reluctantly followed, grumbling about long distances and various veins.

Although upon the high-road, both Mrs. Bindle and Mr. Hearty were what Bindle regarded as "a bit jumpy."

From time to time they looked about them with obvious apprehension, as if anticipating that from every point of the compass a bull was preparing to charge down upon them.

They paused at the main-entrance to the farm, allowing Bindle to lead the way.

Half-way towards the house, their nostrils were assailed by a devastating smell. Mr. Hearty held his breath, whilst Mrs. Bindle produced a handkerchief, wiped her lips and then held it to her nose. She had always been given to understand that the only antidote for a bad smell was to spit; but she was too refined to act up to the dictum without the aid of her handkerchief.

"Pigs!" remarked Bindle, raising his head and sniffing with the air of a connoisseur.

"Extremely insanitary," murmured Mr. Hearty. "You did say the—er bull was tied up, Joseph?" he enquired.

"Well, 'e was when I see 'im," said Bindle, "but of

course it wouldn't take long for 'im to undo 'imself."

Mr. Hearty glanced about him anxiously.

In front of the house the party paused. Nowhere was anyone to be seen. An old cart with its shafts pointing heavenward stood on the borders of a duck pond, green with slime.

The place was muddy and unclean, and Mrs. Bindle, with a look of disgust, drew up her skirts almost to the tops of her elastic-sided boots.

Bindle looked about him with interest. A hen appeared round the corner of the house, gazed at the newcomers for a few seconds, her head on one side, then disappeared from whence she had come.

Ducks stood on their heads in the water, or quacked comfortably as they swam about, apparently either oblivious or indifferent to the fact that there were callers.

From somewhere in the distance could be heard the sound of a horse stamping in its stall.

At the end of five minutes an old man appeared carrying a pail. At the sight of strangers, he stopped dead, his slobbering lips gaping in surprise.

" Can I see Mr. Timkins ? " enquired Mr. Hearty, in refined but woolly tones.

" Farmer be over there wi' Bessie. I tell un she'll foal 'fore night ; but 'e will 'ave it she won't. 'E'll see, 'e will," he added with the air of a fatalist.

Mr. Hearty turned aside and became interested in the ducks, whilst Mrs. Bindle flushed a deep vermilion. Bindle said nothing ; but watched with enjoyment the confusion of the others.

The man stared at them, puzzled to account for their conduct.

"Where did you say Mr. Timkins was to be found?" enquired Mr. Hearty.

"I just tell ee, in the stable wi' Bessie. 'E says she won't foal; but I know she will. Why she——"

Mr. Hearty did not wait for further information; but turned and made for what, from the motion of the man's head, he took to be the stable.

The others followed.

"No, not there," yelled the man, as if he were addressing someone in the next field. "Turn round to left o' that there muck 'eap."

A convulsive shudder passed over Mr. Hearty's frame. He was appalled at the coarseness engendered by an agricultural existence. He hurried on so that he should not have to meet Mrs. Bindle's eye.

At that moment Farmer Timkins was seen approaching. He was a short, red-faced man in a bob-tailed coat with large flapped-pockets, riding-breeches and gaiters. In his hand he carried a crop which, at the sight of Mrs. Bindle, he raised to his hat in salutation.

"Mornin'."

"Good afternoon," said Mr. Hearty genteelly.

The farmer fixed his eyes upon Mr. Hearty's emaciated sallowness, with all the superiority of one who knows that he is a fine figure of a man.

"It was you that upset Oscar, wasn't it?" There was more accusation than welcome in his tone.

"Upset Oscar?" enquired Mr. Hearty, nervously

looking from the farmer to Mrs. Bindle, then back again to the farmer.

"Yes, my bull," explained Mr. Timkins.

"It was Oscar wot nearly upset pore old 'Earty," grinned Bindle.

"A savage beast like that ought to be shot," cried Mrs. Bindle, gazing squarely at the farmer. "It nearly killed——"

"Ought to be shot!" repeated the farmer, a dull flush rising to his face. "Shoot Oscar! Are you mad, ma'am?" he demanded, making an obvious effort to restrain his anger.

"Don't you dare to insult me," she cried. "You set that savage brute on to Mr. Hearty and it nearly killed him. I shall report you to the bishop—and—and—to the police," she added as an after-thought. "You ought to be prosecuted."

Mrs. Bindle's lips had disappeared into a grey line, her face was very white, particularly at the corners of the mouth. For nearly two hours she had restrained herself. Now that she was face to face with the owner of the bull that had nearly plunged her into mourning, her anger burst forth.

The farmer looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

"Report me to the police," he repeated dully. "What——"

"Yes, and I will too," cried Mrs. Bindle, interpreting the farmer's strangeness of manner as indicative of fear. "Mad bulls are always shot."

The farmer focussed his gaze upon Mrs. Bindle, as

if she belonged to a new species. His anger had vanished. He was overcome by surprise that anyone should be so ignorant of bulls and their ways as to believe Oscar mad.

" Why, ma'am, Oscar's no more mad than you or me. He's just a bit fresh. Most times he's as gentle as a lamb."

" Don't talk to me about lambs," cried Mrs. Bindle, now thoroughly roused. " With my own eyes I saw it chasing Mr. Hearty across the field. It's a wonder he wasn't killed. I shall insist upon the animal being destroyed."

The farmer turned to Bindle, as if for an explanation of such strange views upon bulls in general and Oscar in particular.

" Oscar's all right, Lizzie," said Bindle pacifically. " 'E only wanted to play tag with 'Earty."

" You be quiet ! " cried Mrs. Bindle. She felt that she already had the enemy well beaten and in terror of prosecution.

" I suppose," she continued, turning once more to Mr. Timkins, " you want to hide the fact that you're keeping a mad bull until you can turn it into beef and send it to market ; but——"

" Turn Oscar into beef ! " roared the farmer. " Why, God dang my boots, ma'am, you're crazy ! I wouldn't sell Oscar for a thousand pounds."

" I thought so," said Mrs. Bindle, looking across at Mr. Hearty, who was feeling intensely uncomfortable, " and people are to be chased about the country and murdered just because you won't——"

"But dang it, ma'am! there isn't a bull like Oscar for twenty miles round. Last year I had—let me see, how many calves——"

"Don't be disgusting," she cried, whilst Mr. Hearty turned his head aside, and coughed modestly into his right hand.

Mr. Timkins gazed from one to the other in sheer amazement, whilst Bindle, who had so manœuvred as to place himself behind Mrs. Bindle, caught the farmer's eye and tapped his forehead significantly.

The simple action seemed to have a magical effect upon Mr. Timkins. His anger disappeared and his customary bluff geniality returned.

He acknowledged Bindle's signal with a wink, then he turned to Mrs. Bindle.

"You see, ma'am, this is all my land, and I let the bishop have his camp——"

"That doesn't excuse you for keeping a mad bull," was the uncompromising retort. The life of her hero had been endangered, and Mrs. Bindle was not to be placated by words.

"But Oscar ain't mad," protested the farmer, taking off his hat and mopping his forehead with a large coloured-handkerchief he had drawn from his tail-pocket. "I tell you he's no more mad than what I am."

"And I tell you he is," she retorted, with all the assurance of one thoroughly versed in the ways of bulls.

"You see, it's like this here, mum," he said soothingly, intent upon placating one who was not "quite all

there," as he would have expressed it. "It's all through the wind gettin' round to the sou'west. If it hadn't been for that——"

"Don't talk to me about such rubbish," she interrupted scornfully. "I wonder you don't say it's because there's a new moon. I'm not a fool, although I haven't lived all my life on a farm."

The farmer looked about him helplessly. Then he made another effort.

"You see, ma'am, when the wind's in the sou'west, Oscar gets a whiff o' them cows in the home——"

"How dare you!" The colour of Mrs. Bindle's cheeks transcended anything that Bindle had ever seen. "How dare you speak to me! How—you coarse—you—you disgusting beast!"

At the sight of Mrs. Bindle's blazing eyes and heaving chest, the farmer involuntarily retreated a step.

Several times he blinked his eyes in rapid succession.

Mr. Hearty turned and concentrated his gaze upon what the old man had described as "that there muck 'eap."

"Bindle!" cried Mrs. Bindle. "Will you stand by and let that man insult me? He's a coarse, low——" Her voice shook with suppressed passion. Mr. Hearty drew out his handkerchief and coughed into it.

For several seconds Mrs. Bindle stood glaring at the farmer, then, with a sudden movement, she turned and walked away with short, jerky steps of indignation.

Mr. Hearty continued to gaze at the muck heap, whilst the farmer watched the retreating form of Mrs.

Bindle, as if she had been a double-headed calf, or a three-legged duck.

When she had disappeared from sight round the corner of the house, he once more mopped his forehead with the coloured-handkerchief, then, thrusting it into his pocket, he resumed his hat with the air of a man who has escaped from some deadly peril.

"It's all that there Jim," he muttered. "I told him to look out for the wind and move them cows; but will he? Not if he knows it, dang him."

"Don't you take it to 'eart," said Bindle cheerily. "It ain't no good to start back-chat with my missis."

"But she said Oscar ought to be shot," grumbled the farmer. "Shoot Oscar!" he muttered to himself.

"You see, it's like this 'ere, religion's a funny thing. When it gets 'old of you, it either makes you mild, like 'Earty 'ere, or it makes you as 'ot as onions, like my missis. She don't mean no 'arm; but when you gone 'ead first over a stile, an' your sort o' shy about yer legs, it don't make you feel you wants to give yer sugar ticket to the bull wot did it."

"The—the strawberries, Joseph," Mr. Hearty broke in upon the conversation, addressing Bindle rather than the farmer, of whom he stood in some awe.

"Ah! dang it, o' course, them strawberries," cried the farmer, who had been advised by Patrol-leader Smithers that a potential customer would call. "Come along this way," and he led the way to a large barn, still mumbling under his breath.

"This way," he cried again, as he entered and pointed

to where stood row upon row of baskets full of strawberries, heavily scenting the air. Hearty walked across the barn, picked up a specimen of the fruit and bit it.

"What price are you asking for them?" he enquired.

"Fourpence," was the retort.

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Hearty with all the instincts of the chafferer, "that I could not pay more than——"

"Then go to hell!" roared the farmer. "You get off my farm or—or I'll let Oscar loose," he added with inspiration.

For the last quarter of an hour he had restrained himself with difficulty; but Mr. Hearty's bargaining instinct had been the spark that had ignited the volcano of his wrath.

Mr. Hearty started back violently; stumbled against a large stone and sat down with a suddenness that caused his teeth to rattle.

"Off you go!" yelled the farmer, purple with rage. "Here Jim," he shouted; but Mr. Hearty waited for nothing more. Picking himself up, he fled blindly, he knew not whither. It sufficed him that it should be away from that muscular arm which was gripping a formidable-looking crop.

Bindle turned to follow, feeling that his own popularity had been submerged in the negative qualities of his wife and brother-in-law; but the farmer put out a restraining hand.

"Not you," he said, "you come up to the house. I can give you a mug of ale the like of which you haven't tasted for years. I'm all upset, I am," he added, as if to excuse his outburst. "I'm not forgettin' that it

was you that came an' told me about Oscar. He might a-done a middlin' bit o' damage." Then, suddenly recollecting the cause of all the trouble, he added, "Dang that old Jim! It was them cows what did it. Shoot Oscar!"

CHAPTER X

THE COMING OF THE WHIRLWIND

I

"IT'S come, mate."

"Go away, we're not up yet," cried the voice of Mrs. Bindle from inside the tent.

"It's come, mate," repeated a lugubrious voice, which Bindle recognised as that of the tall, despondent man with the stubbly chin.

"Who's come?" demanded Bindle, sitting up and throwing the bedclothes from his chest, revealing a washed-out pink flannel night-shirt.

"The blinkin' field-kitchen," came the voice from without. "Comin' to 'ave a look at it?"

"Righto, ole sport. I'll be out in two ticks."

"I won't have that man coming up to the tent when—when we're not up," said Mrs. Bindle angrily.

"It's all right, Lizzie," reassured Bindle, "'e can't see through—an' 'e ain't that sort o' cove neither," he added.

Mrs. Bindle murmured an angry retort.

Five minutes later Bindle, with trailing braces, left the tent and joined the group of men and children

gazing at a battered object that was strangely reminiscent of Stevenson's first steam-engine.

"That's it," said the man with the stubbly chin, whose name was Barnes, known to his intimates as "'Arry," turning to greet Bindle and jerking a dirt-grimed thumb in the direction of the travelling field-kitchen.

Dubious heads were shaken. Many of the men had already had practical experience of the temperament possessed by an army field-kitchen.

"At Givenchy I see one of 'em cut in 'alf by a 'Crump,'" muttered a little dark-haired man, with red-rimmed eyes that seemed to blink automatically. "It wasn't 'alf a sight, neither," he added.

"Who's goin' to stoke?" demanded Barnes, rubbing his chin affectionately with the pad of his right thumb.

"'Im wot's been the wickedest," suggested Bindle.

They were in no mood for lightness, however. None had yet breakfasted, and all had suffered the acute inconvenience of camping under the supreme direction of a benign but misguided cleric.

"Wot the 'ell I come 'ere for, I don't know," said a man with a moist, dirty face. "Might a gone to Southend with my brother-in-law, I might," he added reminiscently.

"You wasn't 'alf a mug, was you?" remarked a wiry little man in a singlet and khaki trousers.

"You're right there, mate," was the response. "Blinkin' barmy I must a' been."

"I was goin' to Yarmouth," confided a third, "only

my missis got this ruddy camp on the streamin' brain. Jawed about it till I was sick and give in for peace an' quietness. Now, look at me."

"It's all the ruddy Government, a-startin' these 'ere stutterin' camps," complained a red-headed man with the face of a Bolshevist.

"They 'as races at Yarmouth, too," grumbled the previous speaker.

"Not till September," put in another.

"August," said the first speaker aggressively, and the two proceeded fiercely to discuss the date of the Yarmouth Races.

When the argument had gone as far as it could without blows, and had quieted all other conversation, Bindle slipped away from the group and returned to the tent to find Mrs. Bindle busy preparing breakfast.

He smacked his lips with the consciousness that of all the campers he was the best fed.

"Gettin' a move on," he cried cheerily, and once more he smacked his lips.

"Pity you can't do something to help," she retorted, "instead of loafing about with that pack of lazy scamps."

Bindle retired to the interior of the tent and proceeded with his toilet.

"That's right, take no notice when I speak to you," she snapped.

"Oh, my Gawd!" he groaned. "It's scratch all night an' scrap all day. It's an 'oliday all right."

He strove to think of something tactful to say; but at the moment nothing seemed to suggest itself, and Mrs. Bindle viciously broke three eggs into the frying-pan in which bacon was already sizzling, like an energetic wireless-plant.

The savoury smell of the frying eggs and bacon reached Bindle inside the tent, inspiring him with feelings of benevolence and good-will.

"I'm sorry, Lizzie," he said contritely, "but I didn't 'ear you."

"You heard well enough what I said," was Mrs. Bindle's rejoinder, as she broke a fourth egg into the pan.

"The kitchen's come," he said pleasantly.

"Oh, has it?" Mrs. Bindle did not raise her eyes from the frying-pan she was holding over the scout-fire.

For a minute or two Bindle preserved silence, wondering what topic he possessed that would soothe her obvious irritation.

"They say the big tent's down at the station," he remarked, repeating a rumour he had heard when engaged in examining the field-kitchen.

Mrs. Bindle vouchsafed no reply.

"Did you sleep well, Lizzie?" he enquired.

"Sleep!" she repeated scornfully. "How was I to sleep on rough straw like that. I ache all over."

He saw that he had made a false move in introducing the subject of sleep.

"The milk hasn't come," she announced presently with the air of one making a statement she knew

would be unpopular. Bindle hated tea without milk.

"You don't say so," he remarked. "I must 'ave a word with Daisy. She didn't oughter be puttin' on 'er bloomin' frills."

"The paraffin's got into the sugar," was the next bombshell.

"Well, well," said Bindle. "I suppose you can't 'ave everythink as you would like it."

"Another time, perhaps you'll get up yourself and help with the meals."

"I ain't much at them sort o' things," he replied, conscious that Mrs. Bindle's anger was rising.

"You leave me to do everything, as if I was your slave instead of your wife."

Bindle remained silent. He realized that there were times when it was better to bow to the storm.

"Ain't it done yet?" he enquired, looking anxiously at the frying-pan.

"That's all you care about, your stomach," she cried, her voice rising hysterically. "So long as you've got plenty to eat, nothing else matters. I wonder I stand it. I—I——"

Bindle's eyes were still fixed anxiously upon the frying-pan, which, in her excitement, Mrs. Bindle was moving from side to side of the fire.

"Look out!" he cried, "you'll upset it, an' I'm as 'ungry as an 'awk."

Suddenly the light of madness sprang into her eyes.

"Oh! you are, are you? Well, get somebody else to cook your meals," and with that she inverted the

frying-pan, tipping the contents into the fire. As Bindle sprang up from the box on which he had been sitting, she rubbed the frying-pan into the ashes, making a hideous mess of the burning-wood, eggs and bacon.

With a scream that was half a sob, she fled to the shelter of the tent, leaving Bindle to gaze down upon the wreck of what had been intended for his breakfast.

Picking up a stick, charred at one end, he began to rake among the embers in the vague hope of being able to disinter from the wreck something that was eatable; but Mrs. Bindle's action in rubbing the frying-pan into the ashes had removed from the contents all semblance of food. With a sigh he rose to his feet to find the bishop gazing down at him.

"Had a mishap?" he asked pleasantly.

"You've 'it it, sir," grinned Bindle. "Twenty years ago," he added in a whisper.

"Twenty years ago!" murmured the bishop, a puzzled expression on his face. "What was twenty years ago?"

"The little mis'ap wot you was talkin' about, sir," explained Bindle, still in a whisper. "I married Mrs. B. then, an' she gets a bit jumpy now and again."

"I see," whispered the bishop, "she upset the breakfast."

"Well, sir, you can put it that way; but personally myself, I think it was the breakfast wot upset 'er."

"And you've got nothing to eat?"

"Not even a tin to lick out, sir."

"Dear me, dear me!" cried the bishop, genuinely distressed, and then, suddenly catching sight of Barnes's lugubrious form appearing from behind a neighbouring tent, he hailed him.

Barnes approached with all the deliberation and unconcern of a pronounced fatalist.

"Our friend here has had a mishap," said the bishop, indicating the fire. "Will you go round to my tent and get some eggs and bacon. Hurry up, there's a good fellow."

Barnes turned on a deliberate heel, whilst Bindle and the bishop set themselves to the reconstruction of the scout-fire.

A quarter of an hour later, when Mrs. Bindle peeped out of the tent, she saw the bishop and Bindle engaged in frying eggs and bacon; whilst Barnes stood gazing down at them with impassive pessimism.

Rising to stretch his cramped legs, the bishop caught sight of Mrs. Bindle.

"Good morning, Mrs. Bindle. I hope your headache is better. Mr. Bindle has been telling me that he has had a mishap with your breakfast, so I'm helping him to cook it. I hope you won't mind if I join you in eating it."

"Now that's wot I call tack," muttered Bindle under his breath, "but my! ain't 'e a prize liar, 'im a parson too."

Mrs. Bindle came forward, an expression on her face that was generally kept for the Rev. Mr. MacFie, of the Alton Road Chapel.

"It's very kind of you, sir. I'm sorry Bindle let you help with the cooking."

"But I'm going to help with the eating," cried the bishop gaily.

"But it's not fit work for a——"

"I know what you're going to say," said the bishop, "and I don't want you to say it. Here we are all friends, helping one another, and giving a meal when the hungry appears. For this morning I'm going to fill the rôle of the hungry. I wonder if you'll make the tea, Mrs. Bindle, Mr. Bindle tells me your tea is wonderful."

"Oh, my Gawd!" murmured Bindle, casting up his eyes.

With what was almost a smile, Mrs. Bindle proceeded to do the bishop's bidding.

During the meal Bindle was silent, leaving the conversation to Mrs. Bindle and the bishop. By the time he had finished his third cup of tea, Mrs. Bindle was almost gay.

The bishop talked household-management, touched on religion and Christian charity, slid off again to summer-camps, thence on to marriage, babies and the hundred and one other things dear to a woman's heart.

When he finally rose to go, Bindle saw in Mrs. Bindle's eyes a smile that almost reached her lips.

"I hope that if ever you honour us again, sir, you will let me know——"

"No, Mrs. Bindle, it's the unexpected that delights me, and I'm going to be selfish. Thank you for your

hospitality and our pleasant chat," and with that he was gone.

"Well, I'm blowed!" muttered Bindle as he gazed after the figure of the retreating bishop, "an' me always thinkin' that you 'ad to 'ave an 'ymn an' a tin o' salmon to make love to Mrs. B."

"And now, I suppose, you'll go off and leave me to do all the washing-up. Butter wouldn't melt in your mouth when the bishop was here. You couldn't say a word before him," she snapped, and she proceeded to gather together the dishes.

"No," muttered Bindle as he fetched some sticks for the fire. "'E can talk tack all right; but when you wants it to last, it's better to 'ave a tin o' salmon to fall back on."

That morning Daisy had a serious rival in the field-kitchen, which like her was an unknown quantity, capable alike of ministering to the happiness of all, or of withholding that which was expected of it.

It was soon obvious to the bishop that the field-kitchen was going to prove as great a source of anxiety as Daisy. No one manifested any marked inclination to act as stoker. Apart from this, the bishop had entirely forgotten the important item of fuel, having omitted to order either coal or coke. In addition there was a marked suspicion, on the part of the wives, of what they regarded as a new-fangled way of cooking a meal. Many of them had already heard of army field-kitchens from their husbands, and were filled with foreboding.

It took all the bishop's tact and enthusiasm to modify their obvious antagonism.

"I ain't a-goin' to trust anythink o' mine in a rusty old thing like that," said a fat woman with a grimy skin and scanty hair.

"Same 'ere, they didn't ought to 'ave let us come down without making proper pervision," complained a second, seizing an opportunity when the bishop's head was in the stoke-hole to utter the heresy.

"Bless me!" he said, withdrawing his head, unconscious that there was a black smudge on the right episcopal cheek. "It will take a dreadful lot of fuel. Now, who will volunteer to stoke?" turning his most persuasive smile upon the group of men, who had been keenly interested in his examination of the contrivance.

The men shuffled their feet, looked at one another, as if each expected to find in another the spirit of sacrifice lacking in himself.

Their disinclination was so marked that the bishop's face fell, until he suddenly caught sight of Bindle approaching.

"Ah!" he cried. "Here's the man I want. Now, Bindle," he called out, "you saved us from the bull, how would you like to become stoker?"

"Surely I ain't as bad as all that, sir," grinned Bindle.

"I'm not speaking professionally," laughed the bishop, who had already ingratiated himself with the men because he did not "talk like a ruddy parson." "I want somebody to take charge of this field-kitchen," he continued. "I'd do it myself, only I've got such

a lot of other things to see to. I'll borrow some coal from Mr. Timkins."

Bindle gazed dubiously at the unattractive mass of iron, dabbed with the weather-worn greens and browns of camouflage and war.

"It's quite simple," said the bishop. "You light the fire here, that's the oven, and you boil things here, and—we shall soon get it going."

"I don't mind stokin', sir," said Bindle at length "but I ain't a-goin' to take charge of 'oo's dinner's wot If there's goin' to be any scrappin' with the ladies, well, I ain't in it."

Finally it was arranged that Bindle should start the fire and get the field-kitchen into working order, and that the putting-in the oven and taking-out again of the various dishes should be left to the discretion of the campers themselves, who were to be responsible for the length of time required to cook their own particular meals.

With astonishing energy, the bishop set the children to collect wood, and soon Bindle, throwing himself into the work with enthusiasm, had the fire well alight. There had arrived from the farm a good supply of coal and coke.

"You ain't 'alf 'it it unlucky, mate," said the man with the bristly chin. "'E ought to 'ave 'ired a cook," he added. "We come 'ere to enjoy ourselves, not to be blinkin' stokers. That's like them ruddy parsons," he added, "always wantin' somethin' for nuffin."

"'Ere, come along, cheerful," cried Bindle, "give me a 'and with this coke," and, a minute later, the

lugubrious Barnes found himself sweating like a horse, and shovelling fuel into the kitchen's voracious maw.

"That's not the way!"

The man straightened his back and, with one hand on the spade, gazed at Mrs. Bindle, who had approached unobserved. With the grubby thumb of his other hand he rubbed his chin, giving to his unprepossessing features a lopsided appearance.

"Wot ain't the way, missis?" he asked with the air of one quite prepared to listen to reason.

"The coke should be damped," was the response, "and you're putting in too much."

"But we want it to burn up," he protested.

Mrs. Bindle ostentatiously turned upon him a narrow back.

"*You* ought to know better, at least, Bindle," she snapped, and proceeded to give him instruction in the art of encouraging a fire.

"You'd better take some out," she said.

"'Ere ole sport," cried Bindle, "give us——" he stopped suddenly. His assistant had disappeared.

"You mustn't let anyone put anything in until the oven's hot," continued Mrs. Bindle, "and you mustn't open the door too often. You'd better fix a time when they can bring the food, say eleven o'clock."

"Early doors threepence extra?" queried Bindle.

"We're going to have sausage-toad-in-the-hole, and mind you don't burn it."

"I'll watch it as if it was my own cheeild," vowed Bindle.

"If the bishop knew you as I know you, he wouldn't

have trusted you with this," said Mrs. Bindle, as she walked away with indrawn lips and head in the air, stepping with the self-consciousness of a bantam that feels its spurs.

"Blowed if she don't think I volunteered for the bloomin' job," he muttered, as he ceased extracting pieces of coke from the furnace. "Well, if their dinner ain't done it's their fault, an' if it's overdone it ain't mine," and with that he drew his pipe from his pocket and filled it.

"No luck," he cried, as a grey-haired old woman with the dirt of other years on her face hobbled up with a pie-dish. "Doors ain't open yet."

"But it's an onion pie," grumbled the old dame, "and onions takes a lot o' cookin'."

"Can't 'elp it," grinned Bindle. "Doors ain't open till eleven."

"But——" began the woman.

"Nothin', doin' mother," said the obstinate Bindle. "You see this 'ere is a religious kitchen. It's a different sort from an ordinary blasphemious kitchen."

On the stroke of eleven Mrs. Bindle appeared with a large brown pie-dish, the sight of which made Bindle's mouth water.

"Now then," he cried, "line up for the bakin'-queue. Shillin' a 'ead an' all bad nuts changed. Oh! no, you don't," he cried, as one woman proffered a basin. "I'm stoker, not cook. You shoves 'em in yourself, an' you fetches 'em when you wants 'em. If there's any scrappin' to be done, I'll be umpire."

One by one the dishes were inserted in the oven, and one by one their owners retired, a feeling of greater confidence in their hearts now that they could prepare a proper dinner. The men went off to get a drink, and soon Bindle was alone.

During the first half-hour Mrs. Bindle paid three separate visits to the field-kitchen. To her it was a new and puzzling contrivance, and she had no means of gauging the heat of the oven. She regarded it distrustfully and, on the occasion of the second visit, gave a special word of warning to Bindle.

At 11.40 Barnes returned with a large black bottle, which he held out to Bindle with an invitation to "'ave a drink."

Bindle removed the cork and put the bottle to his lips, and his Adam's apple bobbed up and down joyously.

"Ah!" he cried, as he at length lowered the bottle and his head at the same time. "That's the stuff to give 'em," and reluctantly he handed back the bottle to its owner, who hastily withdrew at the sight of Mrs. Bindle approaching.

When she had taken her departure, Bindle began to feel drowsy. The sun was hot, the air was still, and the world was very good to live in. Still, there was the field-kitchen to be looked after.

For some time he struggled against the call of sleep; but do what he would, his head continued to nod, and his eyelids seemed weighted with lead.

Suddenly he had an inspiration. If he stoked-up the field-kitchen, it would look after itself, and he

could have just the "forty winks" his nature craved.

With feverish energy he set to work with the shovel, treating the two stacks of coal and coke with entire impartiality. Then, when he had filled the furnace, he closed the door with the air of the Roman sentry relieving himself of responsibility by setting a burglar-alarm. Getting well out of the radius of the heat caused by the furnace, he composed himself to slumber behind the heap of coke.

Suddenly he was aroused from a dream in which he stood on the deck of a wrecked steamer, surrounded by steam which was escaping with vicious hisses from the damaged boilers.

He sat up and looked about him. The air seemed white with vapour, in and out of which two figures could be seen moving. He struggled to his feet and looked about him.

A few yards away he saw Mrs. Bindle engaged in throwing water at the field-kitchen, and then dashing back quickly to escape the smother of steam that resulted. The bishop, with a bucket and a pink-and-blue jug, was dashing water on to the monster's back.

Bindle gazed at the scene in astonishment, then, making a detour, he approached from the opposite side, to see what it was that had produced the crisis. Just at that moment, the bishop decided that the pail had been sufficiently lightened by the use of the pink-and-blue jug to enable him to lift it.

A moment later Bindle was the centre of a cascade of water and a mantle of spray.

"'Ere! wot the 'ell?" he bawled.

The bishop dodged round to the other side and apologised profusely, explaining how Mrs. Bindle had discovered that the field-kitchen had become overheated and that between them they were trying to lower its temperature.

"Yes; but I ain't over'eated," protested Bindle.

"You put too much coal in, Bindle; the place would have been red-hot in half an hour."

"Well; but look at all them dinners that——"

"Don't talk to him, my lord," said Mrs. Bindle, who from a fellow-camper had learned how a bishop should be addressed. "He's done it on purpose."

"No, no, Mrs. Bindle," said the bishop genially. "I'm sure he didn't mean to do it. It's really my fault."

And Mrs. Bindle left it at that.

From that point, however, she took charge of the operations, the bishop and Bindle working under her direction. The news that the field-kitchen was on fire, conveyed to their parents by the children, had brought up the campers in full-force and at the double.

There had been a rush for the oven; but Mrs. Bindle soon showed that she had the situation well in hand, and the sight of the bishop doing her bidding had a reassuring effect.

Under her supervision, each dish and basin was withdrawn, and first aid administered to such as required it. Those that were burnt, were tended with a skill and expedition that commanded the admiration of every housewife present. They were content to leave

matters in hands that they recognised were more capable than their own.

When the salvage work was ended, and the dishes and basins replaced in an oven that had been reduced to a suitable temperature, the bishop mopped his brow, whilst Mrs. Bindle stood back and gazed at the field-kitchen as St. George might have regarded the conquered dragon.

Her face was flushed, and her hands were grimed; but in her eyes was a keen satisfaction. For once in her life she had occupied the centre of something larger than a domestic stage.

"My friends," cried the bishop, always ready to say a few words or point the moral, "we are all under a very great obligation to our capable friend Mrs. Bindle, a veritable Martha among women;" he indicated Mrs. Bindle with a motion of what was probably the dirtiest episcopal hand in the history of the Church. "She has saved the situation and, what is more, she has saved our dinners. Now," he cried boyishly, "I call for three cheers for Mrs. Bindle."

And they were given with a heartiness that caused Mrs. Bindle a queer sensation at the back of her throat.

The campers flocked round her and found that she whom they had regarded as "uppish," could be almost gracious. Anyhow, she had saved their dinners.

It was Mrs. Bindle's hour.

"Fancy 'im a-callin' 'er Martha, when 'er name's Lizzie," muttered Bindle, as he strolled off. He had taken no very prominent part in the proceedings—

he was a little ashamed of the part he had played in what had proved almost a tragedy.

That day the Tired Workers dined because of Mrs. Bindle, and they knew it. Various were the remarks exchanged among the groups collected outside the tents.

"She didn't 'alf order the bishop about," remarked to his wife the man who should have gone to Yarmouth.

"Any way, if it 'adn't been for 'er you'd 'ave 'ad cinders instead o' baked chops and onions for yer dinner," was the rejoinder, as his wife, a waspish little woman, rubbed a piece of bread round her plate. "She ain't got much to learn about a kitchen stove, I'll say that for 'er," she added, with the air of one who sees virtue in unaccustomed places.

That afternoon when Bindle was lying down inside the tent, endeavouring to digest some fifty per cent. more sausage-toad-in-the-hole than he was licensed to carry, he was aroused from a doze by the sound of voices without.

"We brought 'em for you, missis." It was the man with the stubbly chin speaking.

"Must 'ave made you a bit firsty, all that 'eat," remarked another voice.

Bindle sat up. Events were becoming interesting. He crept to the opening of the tent and slightly pulled aside the flap.

"Best dinner we've 'ad yet." The speaker was the man who had seen a field-kitchen dissected at

Givenchy. He was just in the line of Bindle's vision.

Pulling the flap still further aside, he saw half-a-dozen men standing awkwardly before Mrs. Bindle who, with a bottle of Guinness' stout in either hand, was actually smiling.

"It's very kind of you," she said. "Thank you very much."

In his astonishment, Bindle dropped the flap, and the picture was blotted out.

"Come an' 'ave a look at Daisy," he heard the man with the stubbly chin say. It was obviously his conception of terminating an awkward interview.

"Good day," he heard a voice mumble, to which Mrs. Bindle replied with almost cordiality.

Bindle scrambled back to his mattress, just as Mrs. Bindle pulled aside the flap of the tent and entered, a bottle still in either hand. At the sight, Bindle became aware of a thirst which until then had slumbered.

"I can do with a drop o' Guinness," he cried cheerily, his eyes upon the bottles. "Nice o' them coves to think of us."

"It was me, not you," was Mrs. Bindle's rejoinder, as she stepped across to her mattress.

"But you don't drink beer, Lizzie," he protested. "You're temperance. I'll drink 'em for you."

"If you do, I'll kill you, Bindle." And the intensity with which she uttered the threat decided him that it would be better to leave the brace of Guinness severely alone; but he was sorely puzzled.

II

That evening, in the sanded tap-room of The Trowel and Turtle, the male summer-campers expressed themselves for the twentieth time uncompromisingly upon the subject of bishops and summer-camps. They were "fed up to the ruddy neck," and would give not a little to be back in London, where it was possible to find a pub "without gettin' a blinkin' blister on your stutterin' 'eel."

It was true the field-kitchen had arrived, that they had eaten their first decent meal, and there was every reason to believe that the marquee was at the station; still they were "sick of the whole streamin' business."

To add to their troubles the landlord of The Trowel and Turtle expressed grave misgivings as to the weather. The glass was dropping, and there was every indication of rain.

"Rain'll jest put the scarlet lid on this blinkin' beano," was the opinion expressed by one of the party and endorsed by all, as, with the landlord's advice to see that everything was made snug for the night, they trooped out of the comfortable tap-room and turned their heads towards the Summer-Camp.

At the entrance of the meadow they were met by Patrol-leader Smithers.

"You must slack the ropes of your tents," he announced, "there may be rain. Only just slack them

a bit ; don't overdo it, or they'll come down on the top of you if the wind gets up."

" Oh crikey ! " moaned a long man with a straggling moustache, as he watched Patrol-leader Smithers march briskly down the lane.

For some moments the men gazed at one another in consternation ; each visualised the desperate state of discomfort that would ensue as the result of wind and rain.

" Let's go an' 'ave a look at Daisy," said Bindle inconsequently.

His companions stared at him in surprise. A shrill voice in the distance calling " 'Enery " seemed to lend to them decision, particularly to 'Enery himself. They turned and strolled over to where Daisy was engaged in preparing the morrow's milk supply. She had been milked and was content.

" Look 'ere, mates," began Bindle, having assured himself that there were no eavesdroppers, " we're all fed up with Summer-Camps for tired workers—that so ? "

" Up to the blinkin' neck," said a big man with a dirt-grimed skin, voicing the opinion of all.

" There ain't no pubs," said a burly man with black whiskers, " no pictures, can't put a shillin' on an 'orse, can't do anythink——"

" But watch this ruddy cow," broke in the man with the stubbly chin.

" Well, well, p'raps you're right, only I couldn't 'ave said it 'alf as politely," said Bindle, with a grin.

"We're all for good ole Fulham where a cove can lay the dust. Ain't that so, mates?"

The men expressed their agreement according to the intensity of their feelings.

"Well, listen," said Bindle, "an' I'll tell you." They drew nearer and listened.

Twenty minutes later, when the voice demanding 'Enery became too insistent to be denied, the party broke up, and there was in the eyes of all that which spoke of hope.

III

That night, as Patrol-leader Smithers had foretold, there arose a great wind which smote vigorously the tents of the Surrey Summer-Camp for Tired Workers. For a time the tents withstood the fury of the blast; they swayed and bent before it, putting up a vigorous defence however. Presently a shriek told of the first catastrophe; then followed another and yet another, and soon the darkness was rent by cries, shrieks, and lamentations, whilst somewhere near the Bindles' tent rose the voice of one crying from a wilderness of canvas for 'Enery.

Mrs. Bindle was awakened by the loud slatting of the tent-flap. Pandemonium seemed to have broken loose. The wind howled and whistled through the tent-ropes, the rain swept against the canvas sides with an ominous "swish," the pole bent as the tent swayed from side to side.

"Bindle," she cried, "get up!"

"'Ullo!" he responded sleepily. He had taken the precaution of not removing his trousers, a circumstance that was subsequently used as evidence against him.

"The tent's coming down," she cried. "Get up and hold the prop."

As she spoke, she scrambled from beneath the blankets and seized the brown mackintosh, which she kept ready to hand in case of accidents. Wrapping this about her, she clutched at the bending pole, whilst Bindle struggled out from among the bedclothes.

Scrambling to his feet, he tripped over the tin-bath. Clutching wildly as he fell, he got Mrs. Bindle just above the knees in approved rugger style.

With a scream she relinquished the pole to free her legs from Bindle's frenzied clutch and, losing her footing, she came down on top of him.

"Leave go," she cried.

"Get up orf my stomach then," he gasped.

At that moment, the wind gave a tremendous lift to the tent. Mrs. Bindle was clutching wildly at the base of the pole, Bindle was striving to wriggle from beneath her. The combination of forces caused the tent to sway wildly. A moment later, it seemed to start angrily from the ground, and she fell over backwards, whilst a mass of sopping canvas descended, stifling alike her screams and Bindle's protests that he was being killed.

It took Bindle nearly five minutes to find his way

out from the heavy folds of wet canvas. Then he had to go back into the darkness to fetch Mrs. Bindle. In order to effect his own escape, Bindle had cut the tent-ropes. Just as he had found Mrs. Bindle, a wild gust of wind entered behind him, lifted the tent bodily and bore it off.

The suddenness of the catastrophe seemed to strike Mrs. Bindle dumb. To be sitting in the middle of a meadow at dead of night, clothed only in a nightdress and a mackintosh, with the rain drenching down, seemed to her to border upon the indecent.

"You there, Lizzie?" came the voice of Bindle, like the shout of one hailing a drowning person.

"Where's the tent?" demanded Mrs. Bindle inconsequently.

"Gawd knows!" he shouted back. "Probably it's at Yarmouth by now. 'Oly ointment," he yelled.

"What's the matter?"

"I trodden on the marjarine."

"It's all we've got," she cried, her housewifely fears triumphing over even the stress of wind and rain and her own intolerable situation.

From the surrounding darkness came shouts and enquiries as disaster followed disaster. Heaving masses of canvas laboured and, one by one, produced figures scanty of garment and full of protest; but mercifully unseen.

Women cried, children shrieked, and men swore volubly.

"I'm sittin' in somethink sticky," cried Bindle presently.

"You've upset the marmalade. Why can't you keep still?"

Keep still! Bindle was searching for the two bottles of Guinness' stout he knew to be somewhere among the débris, unconscious that Mrs. Bindle had packed them away in the tin-bath.

As the other tents disgorged their human contents, the pandemonium increased. In every key, appeals were being made for news of lost units.

By the side of the tin-bath Mrs. Bindle was praying for succour and the lost bell-tent, which had sped towards the east as if in search of the wise men, leaving all beneath it naked to the few stars that peeped from the scudding clouds above, only to hide their faces a moment later as if shocked at what they had seen.

Suddenly a brilliant light flashed across the meadow and began to bob about like a hundred candle power will-o'-the-wisp. It dodged restlessly from place to place, as if in search of something.

Behind a large acetylene motor-lamp, walked Patrol-leader Smithers, searching for one single erect bell-tent—there was none.

Shrieks that had been of terror now became cries of alarm. Forms that had struggled valiantly to escape from the billowing canvas, now began desperately to wriggle back again to the seclusion that modesty demanded. With heads still protruding they regarded the scene, praying that the rudeness of the wind would not betray them.

Taking immediate charge, Patrol-leader Smithers

collected the men and gave his orders in a high treble, and his orders were obeyed.

By the time the dawn had begun nervously to finger the east, sufficient tents to shelter the women and children had been re-erected, the cause of the trouble discovered, and the men rebuked for an injudicious slacking of the ropes.

"I ought to have seen to it myself," remarked Patrol-leader Smithers with the air of one who knows he has to deal with fools. "You'll be all right now," he added reassuringly.

"All right now," growled the man with the stubbly chin as he looked up at the grey scudding clouds and then down at the rain-soaked grass. "We would if we was ducks, or ruddy boy scouts; but we're men, we are—on 'oliday," he added with inspiration, and he withdrew to his tent, conscious that he had voiced the opinion of all.

V

Later that morning three carts, laden with luggage, rumbled their way up to West Boxton railway-station, followed by a straggling stream of men, women, and children. Overhead heavy rainclouds swung threateningly across the sky. Men were smoking their pipes contentedly, for theirs was the peace which comes of full knowledge. Behind them they had left a litter of bell-tents and the conviction that Daisy in all

probability would explode before dinner-time. What cared they? A few hours hence they would be once more in their known and understood Fulham.

As they reached the station they saw two men struggling with a grey mass that looked like a deflated balloon.

The men hailed the party and appealed for help.

"It's the ruddy marquee," cried a voice.

"The blinkin' tent," cried another, not to be outdone in speculative intelligence.

"You can take it back with you," cried one of the men from the truck.

"We're demobbed, ole son," said Bindle cheerily. "We've struck."

"No more blinkin' camps for me," said the man with the stubbly chin.

"'Ear, 'ear," came from a number of voices.

"Are we down-hearted?" enquired a voice.

"Nooooooooo!"

And the voices of women and children were heard in the response.

Some half an hour later, as the train steamed out of the station, Bindle called out to the porters:

"Tell the bishop not to forget to milk Daisy."

"Well, Mrs. B.," said Bindle that evening as he lighted his pipe after an excellent supper of sausages, fried onions, and mashed potatoes, "you 'ad yer 'oliday."

"I believe you was at the bottom of those tents coming down, Bindle," she cried with conviction.

"Well, you was underneath, wasn't you?" was the response, and Bindle winked knowingly at the white jug with the pink butterfly on the spout.

CHAPTER XI

MRS. BINDLE TAKES A CHILL

I

"YOUR dinner's in the large black saucepan and the potatoes in the blue one. Empty the stewed steak into the yellow pie-dish and the potatoes into the blue vegetable dish and pour water into the saucepans afterwards I've gone to bed —I am feeling ill.

"E. B.

"Don't forget to put water into the empty saucepans or they will burn."

Bindle glanced across at the stove as if to verify Mrs. Bindle's statement, then, with lined forehead, stood gazing at the table, neatly laid for one.

"I never known Lizzie give in before," he muttered, and he walked over to the sink and proceeded to have his evening "rinse," an affair involving a considerable expenditure of soap and much blowing and splashing.

Having wiped his face and hands upon the roller-towel, he walked softly across the kitchen, opened the

door, listened, stepped out into the passage and, finally, proceeded to tiptoe upstairs.

Outside the bedroom door he paused and listened again, his ear pressed against the panel. There was no sound.

With the stealth of a burglar he turned the handle, pushed open the door some eighteen inches and put his head round the corner.

Mrs. Bindle was lying in bed on her back, her face void of all expression, whilst with each indrawn breath there was a hard, metallic sound.

Bindle wriggled the rest of his body round the door-post, closing the door behind him. With ostentatious care, still tiptoeing, he crossed the room and stood by the bedside.

"Ain't you feelin' well, Lizzie?" he asked in a hoarse whisper, sufficient in itself to remind an invalid of death.

"Did you put water in the saucepans?" She asked the question without turning her head, and with the air of one who has something on her mind. The harsh rasp of her voice alarmed Bindle.

"I ain't 'ad supper yet," he said. "Is there anythink you'd like?" he enquired solicitously, still in the same depressing whisper.

"No; just leave me alone," she murmured. "Don't forget the water in the saucepans," she added a moment later.

For some seconds Bindle stood irresolute. He was convinced that something ought to be done; but just what he did not know.

" Wouldn't you like a bit o' fried fish, or—or a pork chop ? " he named at a venture two of his favourite supper dishes. The fish he could buy ready fried, the chop he felt equal to cooking himself.

" Leave me alone." She turned her head aside with a feeble shudder.

" Where are you ill, Lizzie ? " he enquired at length.

" Go away," she moaned, and Bindle turned, tip-toed across to the door and passed out of the room. He was conscious that the situation was beyond him.

That evening he ate his food without relish. His mind was occupied with the invalid upstairs and the problem of what he should do. He was unaccustomed to illness, either in himself or in others. His instinct was to fetch a doctor ; but would she like it ? It was always a little difficult to anticipate Mrs. Bindle's view of any particular action, no matter how well-intentioned.

At the conclusion of the meal, he drew his pipe from his pocket and proceeded to smoke with a view to inspiration.

Suddenly he was roused by a loud pounding overhead.

" 'Oly ointment, she's fallen out ! " he muttered, as he made for the door and dashed up the stairs two at a time.

As he opened the door, he found Mrs. Bindle sitting up in bed, a red flannel petticoat round her shoulders, sniffing the air like a hungry hound.

" You're burning my best saucepan," she croaked,

"I ain't, Lizzie, reelly I ain't——" Then memory came to him. He had forgotten to put water in either of the saucepans.

"I can smell burning," she persisted, "you——"

"I spilt some stoo on the stove," he lied, feeling secure in the knowledge that she could not disprove the statement.

With a groan she sank back on to her pillow.

"The place is like a pigsty. I know it," she moaned with tragic conviction.

"No, it ain't, Lizzie. I'm jest goin' to 'ave a clean-up. Wouldn't you like somethink to eat?" he enquired again, then with inspiration added, "Wot about a tin o' salmon, it'll do your breath good. I'll nip round and get one in two ticks."

But Mrs. Bindle shook her head.

For nearly a minute there was silence, during which Bindle gazed down at her helplessly

"I'm a-goin' to fetch a doctor," he announced at length.

"Don't you dare to fetch a doctor to me."

"But if you ain't well——" he began.

"I tell you I won't have a doctor. Look——" She was interrupted by a fit of coughing which seemed almost to suffocate her. "Look at the state of the bedroom," she gasped at length.

"But wot's goin' to 'appen?" asked Bindle. "You can't——"

"It won't matter," she moaned. "If I die you'll be glad," she added, as if to leave no doubt in Bindle's mind as to her own opinion on the matter.

"No, I shouldn't. 'Ow could I get on without you?"

"Thinking of yourself as usual," was the retort.

Then, suddenly, she half-lifted herself in bed and, once more raising her head, sniffed the air suspiciously.

"I know that saucepan's burning," she said with conviction; but she sank back again, panting. The burning of a saucepan seemed a thing of ever-lessening importance.

"No, it ain't, Lizzie, reelly it ain't. I filled it right up to the brim. It's that bit o' stoo I spilt on the stove. Stinks like billy-o, don't it?" His sense of guilt made him garrulous. "I'll go an' scrape it orf," he added, and with that he was gone.

"Oh, my Gawd!" he muttered as he opened the kitchen door, and was greeted by a volume of bluish smoke that seemed to catch at his throat.

He made a wild dash for the stove, seized the saucepan and, taking it over to the sink, turned on the tap.

A moment later he dropped the saucepan into the sink and started back, blinded by a volume of steam that issued from its interior.

Swiftly and quietly he opened the window and the outer door.

"You ain't no cook, J.B.," he muttered, as he unhitched the roller-towel and proceeded to use it as a fan, with the object of driving the smell out of the window and scullery-door.

When the air was clearer, he returned to the sink and,

this time, filled both the saucepans with water and replaced them on the stove.

"I wonder wot I better do," he muttered, and he looked about him helplessly.

Then, with sudden inspiration, he remembered Mrs. Hearty.

Creeping softly upstairs, he put his head round the bedroom door and announced that he was going out to buy a paper. Without waiting for either criticism or comment, he quickly closed the door again.

Ten minutes later, he was opening the glass-panelled door, with the white curtains and blue tie-ups, that led from Mr. Hearty's Fulham shop to the parlour behind.

Mrs. Hearty was sitting at the table, a glass half-full of Guinness' stout before her.

At the sight of Bindle, she began to laugh, and laughter always reduced her to a state that was half-anguish, half-ecstasy.

"Oh, Joe!" she wheezed, and then began to heave and undulate with mirth.

At the sight of the anxious look on his face she stopped suddenly, and with her clenched fist began to pound her chest.

"It's my breath, Joe," she wheezed. "It don't seem to get no better. 'Ave a drop," she gasped, pointing to the Guinness bottle on the table. "There's a glass on the dresser," she added; but Bindle shook an anxious head.

"It's Lizzie," he said.

" Lizzie ! " wheezed Mrs. Hearty. " What she been doin' now ? "

Mrs. Hearty possessed no illusions about her sister's capacity to contrive any man's domestic happiness. Her own philosophy was, " If things must happen, let 'em," whereas she was well aware that Mrs. Bindle strove to control the wheels of destiny.

" When you're my size," she would say, " you won't want to worry about anything ; it's the lean 'uns as grizzles."

" She's ill in bed," he explained, " an' I don't know wot to do. Says she won't see a doctor, an' she's sort o' fidgetty because she thinks I'm burnin' the bloomin' saucepans—an' I 'ave burned 'em, Martha," he added confidentially. " Such a stink."

Whereat Mrs. Hearty began to heave, and strange movements rippled down her manifold chins. She was laughing.

There was, however, no corresponding light of humour in Bindle's eyes, and she quickly recovered herself. " What's the matter with 'er, Joe ? " she gasped.

" She won't say where it is," he replied. " I think it's 'er chest."

" All right, I'll come round," and she proceeded to make a series of strange heaving movements until, eventually, she acquired sufficient bounce to bring her to her feet. " You go back, Joe," she added.

" Righto, Martha ! You always was a sport," and Bindle walked towards the door. As he opened it

he turned. "You won't say anythink about them saucepans," he said anxiously.

"Oh! go hon, do," wheezed Mrs. Hearty, beginning to undulate once more.

With her brother-in-law, Mrs. Hearty was never able to distinguish between the sacred and the profane.

Half an hour later, Mrs. Hearty and Bindle were standing one on either side of Mrs. Bindle's bed. Mrs. Hearty was wearing a much-worn silk plush cape and an old, pale-blue tam-o-shanter, originally belonging to her daughter, which gave her a rakish appearance.

"What's the matter, Lizzie?" she asked, puffing like a collie in the Dog Days.

"I'm ill. Leave me alone!" moaned Mrs. Bindle in a husky voice.

Bindle looked across at Mrs. Hearty, in a way that seemed to say, "I told you she was bad."

"Don't be a fool, Lizzie," was her sister's uncompromising comment. "You go for a doctor, Joe."

"I won't have——" began Mrs. Bindle, then she stopped suddenly, a harsh, bronchial cough cutting off the rest of her sentence.

"You've got bronchitis," said Mrs. Hearty with conviction. "Put the kettle on before you go out, Joe."

"Leave me alone," moaned Mrs. Bindle. "Oh! I don't want to die, I don't want to die."

"You ain't goin' to die, Lizzie," said Bindle, bending over her, anxiety in his face. "You're goin' to live to be a 'undred."

"You go an' fetch a doctor, Joe. I'll see to 'er,"

and Mrs. Hearty proceeded to remove her elaborate black plush cape.

"I don't want a doctor," moaned Mrs. Bindle. In her heart was a great fear lest he should confirm her own fears that death was at hand; but Bindle had disappeared on his errand of mercy, and Mrs. Hearty was wheezing and groaning as, with arms above her head, she strove to discover the single hat-pin with which she had fixed the tam-o-shanter to her scanty hair.

"There's two rashers of bacon and an egg on the top shelf of the larder for Joe's breakfast," mumured Mrs Bindle hoarsely.

Mrs. Hearty nodded as she passed out of the door.

In spite of her weight and the shortness of her breath, she descended to the kitchen. When Bindle returned, he found the bedroom reeking with the smell of vinegar. Mrs. Bindle was sitting up in bed, a towel enveloping her head, so that the fumes of the boiling vinegar should escape from the basin only by way of her bronchial tubes.

"'Ow is she?" he asked anxiously.

"She's all right," gasped Mrs. Hearty. "Is 'e coming?"

"Be 'ere in two ticks," was the response. "Two of 'em was out, this was the third."

He stood regarding with an air of relief the strange outline of Mrs. Bindle's head enveloped in the towel. Someone had at last done something.

"She ain't a-goin' to die, Martha, is she?" he enquired of Mrs. Hearty, his brow lined with anxiety.

"Not 'er," breathed Mrs. Hearty reassuringly. "It's bronchitis. You just light a fire, Joe."

Almost before the words were out of her mouth, Bindle had tiptoed to the door and was taking the stairs three at a time. Action was the one thing he desired. He determined that, the fire once laid, he would set to work to clean out the saucepan he had burned. Somehow that saucepan seemed to bite deep into his conscience.

The doctor came, saw, and confirmed Mrs. Hearty's diagnosis. Having prescribed a steam-kettle, inhalations of eucalyptus, slop food, warmth and air, he left, promising to look in again on the morrow.

At the bottom of the stairs, he was waylaid by Bindle.

"It ain't——" he began eagerly, then paused.

The doctor, a young, fair man, looked down from his six feet one, at Bindle's anxious enquiring face.

"Nothing to be alarmed about," he said cheerfully. "I'll run in again to-morrow, and we'll soon have her about again."

"Thank you, sir," said Bindle, drawing a sigh of obvious relief. "Funny thing," he muttered as he closed the door on the doctor, "that you never seems to think o' dyin' till somebody gets ill. I'm glad 'e's a big 'un," he added inconsequently. "Mrs. B. likes 'em big," and he returned to the kitchen, where he proceeded to scrape the stove and scour the saucepan, whilst Mrs. Hearty continued to minister to her afflicted sister.

Mrs. Bindle's thoughts seemed to be preoccupied

with her domestic responsibilities. From time to time she issued her instructions.

"Make Joe up a bed on the couch in the parlour," she murmured hoarsely. "I'd keep him awake if he slept here."

"Try an' get Mrs. Coppen to come in to get Joe's dinner," she said, a few minutes later.

And yet again she requested her sister to watch the bread-pan to see that the supply was kept up. "Joe eats a lot of bread," she added.

To all these remarks, Mrs. Hearty returned the same reply. "Don't you worry, Lizzie You just get to sleep."

That night Bindle worked long and earnestly that things might be as Mrs. Bindle had left them; but fate was against him. Nothing he was able to do could remove from the inside of the saucepan the damning evidences of his guilt. The stove, however, was an easier matter; but even that presented difficulties; for, as soon as he applied the moist blacklead, it dried with a hiss and the polishing brush, with the semi-circle of bristles at the end that reminded him of "'Earty's whiskers," instead of producing a polish, merely succeeded in getting burned. Furthermore, he had the misfortune to break a plate and a pie-dish.

At the second smash, there was a tapping from the room above, and, on going to the door, he heard Mrs. Hearty wheezing an enquiry as to what it was that was broken.

"Only an old galley-pot, Martha," he lied, and returned to gather up the pieces. These he wrapped in

a newspaper and placed in the dresser-drawer, determined to carry them off next day. He was convinced that if Mrs. Bindle were about again before the merciful arrival of the dustman, she would inevitably subject the dust-bin to a rigorous examination.

At ten o'clock, Mrs. Hearty heavily descended the stairs and, as well as her breath would permit, she instructed him what to do during the watches of the night. Bindle listened earnestly. Never in his life had he made a linseed poultice, and the management of a steam-kettle was to him a new activity.

When he heard about the bed on the couch, he looked the surprise he felt. Mrs. Bindle never allowed him even to sit on it. He resolutely vetoed the bed, however. He was going to sit up and " try an' bring 'er round," as he expressed it.

" Is she goin' to die, Martha ? " he interrogated anxiously. That question seemed to obsess his thoughts.

Mrs. Hearty shook her head and beat her breast. She lacked the necessary oxygen to reply more explicitly.

Having conducted Mrs. Hearty to the garden gate, he returned, closed and bolted the door, and proceeded upstairs. As he entered the bedroom, he was greeted by a harsh, bronchial cough that terrified him.

" Feelin' better, Lizzie ? " he enquired, with all the forced optimism of a man obviously anxious.

Mrs. Bindle opened her eyes, looked at him for a moment, then, closing them again, shook her head.

" 'As 'e sent you any physic ? " he enquired.

Again Mrs. Bindle shook her head, this time without opening her eyes.

Bindle's heart sank. If the doctor didn't see the necessity for medicine, the case must indeed be desperate.

"What did he say, Joe?" she enquired in a hoarse voice.

In spite of himself Bindle started slightly at the name. He had not heard it for many years.

"'E said you're a-gettin' on fine," he lied.

"Am I very ill? Is it——"

"You ain't got nothink much the matter with you, Lizzie," he replied lightly, in his anxiety to comfort, conveying the impression that she was in extreme danger. "Jest a bit of a chill."

"Am I dying, Joe?"

In spite of its repetition, the name still seemed unfamiliar to him.

"I shall be dead-meat long before you, Lizzie," he said, and his failure to answer her question directly, confirmed Mrs. Bindle in her view that the end was very near.

"I'm goin' to make you some arrowroot, now," he said, with an assurance in his voice that he was far from feeling. Ever since Mrs. Hearty had explained to him the mysteries of arrowroot-making, he had felt how absolutely unequal he was to the task.

Through Mrs. Bindle's mind flashed a vision of milk allowed to boil over; but she felt herself too near the End to put her thoughts into words.

With uncertainty in his heart and anxiety in his eyes, Bindle descended to the kitchen. Selecting a small saucepan, which Mrs. Bindle kept for onions, he poured into it, as instructed by Mrs. Hearty, a breakfast-cupful of milk. This he placed upon the stove, which in one spot was manifesting a dull red tint. Bindle was thorough in all things, especially in the matter of stoking.

He then opened the packet of arrowroot and poured it into a white pudding-basin. At the point where Mrs. Hearty was to have indicated the quantity of arrow-root to be used, she had been more than usually short of breath, with the result that Bindle did not catch the "two-tablespoonfuls" she had mentioned.

He then turned to the stove to watch the milk, for-getting that Mrs. Hearty had warned him to mix the arrowroot into a thin paste with cold milk before pouring on to it the hot.

As the milk manifested no particular excitement, Bindle drew from his pocket the evening paper which, up to now, he had forgotten. He promptly became absorbed in a story of the finding at Enfield of a girl's body bearing evidences of foul play.

He was roused from his absorption by a violent hiss from the stove and, a moment later, he was holding aloft the saucepan, from which a Niagara of white foam streamed over the sides on to the angry stove beneath.

"Wot a stink," he muttered, as he stepped back and turned towards the kitchen table. "Only jest in time, though," he added as, with spoon in one hand,

he proceeded to pour the boiling milk on to the arrow-root, assiduously stirring the while.

"Well, I'm blowed," he muttered as, at the end of some five minutes, he stood regarding a peculiarly stodgy mass composed of a glutinous substance in which were white bubbles containing a fine powder.

For several minutes he stood regarding it doubtfully, and then, with the air of a man who desires to make assurance doubly sure, he spooned the mass out on to a plate and once more stood regarding it.

"Looks as if it wants a few currants," he murmured dubiously, as he lifted the plate from the table, preparatory to taking it up to Mrs. Bindle.

"I brought you somethink to eat, Lizzie," he announced, as he closed the door behind him.

Mrs. Bindle shook her head, then opening her eyes, fixed them upon the strange viscid mass that Bindle extended to her.

"What is that smell?" she murmured wearily.

"Smell," said Bindle, sniffing the air like a cat when fish is boiling. "I don't smell nothink, Lizzie."

"You've burned something," she moaned feebly.

"'Ere, eat this," he said with forced cheerfulness, "then you'll feel better."

Once more Mrs. Bindle opened her eyes, gazed at the mass, then shaking her head, turned her face to the wall.

For five minutes, Bindle strove to persuade her. Finally, recognising defeat, he placed the plate on a chair by the bedside and, seating himself on a little green-painted box, worn at the edges so that the

original white wood showed through, he proceeded to look the helplessness he felt.

"Feelin' better, Lizzie?" he enquired at length, holding his breath eagerly as he waited for the reply.

Mrs. Bindle shook her head drearily, and his heart sank.

Suddenly, he remembered Mrs. Hearty's earnest exhortation to keep the steam-kettle in operation. Once more he descended to the kitchen and, whilst the kettle was boiling, he occupied himself with scraping the heat-flaked milk from the top of the stove.

Throughout that night he laboured at the steam-kettle, or sat gazing helplessly at Mrs. Bindle, despair clutching at his heart, impotence dogging his footsteps. From time to time he would offer her the now cold slab of arrowroot, or else enquire if she were feeling better; but Mrs. Bindle refused the one and denied the other.

With the dawn came inspiration.

"Would you like a kipper for breakfast, Lizzie?" he enquired, hope shining in his eyes.

This time Mrs. Bindle not only shook her head, but manifested by her expression such a repugnance that he felt repulsed. The very thought of kippers made his own mouth water and, recalling that Mrs. Bindle was particularly partial to them, he realised that her condition must be extremely grave.

Soon after nine, Mrs. Hearty arrived and insisted on preparing breakfast for Bindle. Having despatched him to his work she proceeded to tidy-up.

After the doctor had called, Mrs. Bindle once more

sought news as to her condition. This time Mrs. Hearty, obviously keen on reassuring the invalid, succeeded also in confirming her morbid convictions.

At the sight of the plate containing Bindle's conception of arrowroot for an invalid, Mrs. Hearty had at first manifested curiosity, then, on discovering the constituent parts of the unsavoury-looking mess, she had collapsed upon the green-painted box, wheezing and heaving until her gasps for breath caused Mrs. Bindle to open her eyes.

For nearly a week, Bindle and Mrs. Hearty devoted themselves to the sick woman. Every morning Bindle was late for work, and when he could get home he spent more than half of his dinner-hour by Mrs. Bindle's bedside, asking the inevitable question as to whether she were feeling better.

In the evening, he got home as fast as bus, train or tram could take him, and not once did he go to bed.

During the whole period, Mrs. Bindle was as docile and amenable to reason as a poor relation. Never had she been so subdued. From Mrs. Hearty she took the food that was prepared for her, and acquiesced in the remedies administered. Amidst a perfect tornado of wheezes and gaspings, Mrs. Hearty had confided to Bindle that he had better refrain from invalid cookery.

Nothing that either the doctor or Mrs. Hearty could say would convince Mrs. Bindle that she was long for this world. The very cheerfulness of those around her seemed proof positive that they were striving to inspire her with a hope they were far from feeling.

In her contemplation of Eternity, Mrs. Bindle forgot her kitchen, and the probable desolation Bindle was wreaking. Smells of burning, no matter how pungent, left her unmoved, and Bindle, finding that for the first time in his life immunity surrounded him, proceeded from one gastronomic triumph to another. He burned sausages in the frying-pan, boiled dried haddock in a porcelain-lined milk-saucepan and, not daring to confuse the flavour of sausages and fish, had hit upon the novel plan of cooking a brace of bloaters upon the top of the stove itself.

Culinary enthusiasm seized him, and he invented several little dishes of his own. Some were undoubted successes, notably one made up of tomatoes, fried onions and little strips of bacon; but he met his Waterloo in a dish composed of fried onions and eggs. The eggs were much quicker off the mark than the onions, and won in a canter. He quickly realised that swift decision was essential. It was a case either of raw onions and cooked eggs, or cooked onions and cindered eggs.

Never had such scents risen from Mrs. Bindle's stove to the receptive nostrils of the gods; yet through it all Mrs. Bindle made neither protest nor enquiry.

Even Mrs. Hearty was appalled by the state in which she found the kitchen each morning.

"My word, Joe!" she would wheeze. "You don't 'alf make a mess," and she would gaze from the stove to the table, and from the table to the sink, all of which bore manifest evidence of Bindle's culinary activities.

Mrs. Bindle, however, seemed oblivious of the cares of this world in her anxiety not to make the journey to the next. As her breath became more constricted, so her alarm increased.

In her eyes there was a mute appeal that Bindle, for one, found it impossible to ignore. Instinctively he sensed what was troubling her, and he lost no opportunity of striving to reassure her by saying that she would be out and about again before she could say "Jack Robinson."

Still there lurked in her eyes a Great Fear. She had never before had bronchitis, and the difficulty she experienced in breathing seemed to her morbidly suggestive of approaching death. Although she had never seen anyone die, she had in her own mind associated death with a terrible struggle for breath.

Once when Bindle suggested that she might like to see Mr. MacFie, the minister of the Alton Road Chapel, Mrs. Bindle turned upon him such an agonised look that he instinctively shrank back.

"Might-a-been Ole Nick 'isself," he later confided to Mrs. Hearty, "and me a-thinkin' to please 'er."

"She's afraid o' dying, Joe," wheezed Mrs. Hearty. "Alf was just the same when 'e 'ad the flu."

Bindle spent money with the recklessness of a desperate man. He bought strange and inappropriate foods in the hope that they would tempt Mrs. Bindle's appetite. No matter where his work led him, he was always on the look out for some dainty, which he would purchase and carry home in triumph to Mrs. Hearty.

"You ain't 'alf a joke, Joe," she wheezed one evening, sinking down upon a chair and proceeding to heave and billow with suppressed laughter.

Bindle looked lugubriously at the yellow pie-dish into which he had just emptied about a quart of whelks, purchased in the Mile End Road.

"Ain't they good for bronchitis?" he enquired with a crestfallen look.

"Last night it was pig's feet," gasped Mrs. Hearty, "and the night before saveloys," and she proceeded to beat her chest with a grubby fist.

After that, Bindle had fallen back upon less debatable things. He had purchased illustrated papers, flowers, a quarter of a pound of chocolate creams, which had become a little wilted, owing to the crowded state of the tramcar in which he had returned home that night.

During those anxious days, he collected a strange assortment of articles, perishable and otherwise. The thing he could not do was to go home without some token of his solicitude.

One evening he acquired a vividly coloured oleograph in a gilt frame, which depicted a yawning grave, whilst in the distance an angel was to be seen carrying a very material-looking spirit to heaven.

Mrs. Bindle's reception of the gift was a wild look of terror, followed by a fit of coughing that frightened Bindle almost as much as it did her.

"Funny," he remarked later as he carried the picture out of the room. "I thought she'd 'ave liked an angel."

It was Bindle who eventually solved the problem of

how to convey comfort to Mrs. Bindle's distraught spirit.

One evening he accompanied the doctor to her room. After the customary questions and answers between doctor and patient, Bindle suddenly burst out.

"I got a bet on with the doctor, Lizzie."

From an anxious contemplation of the doctor's face, where she had been striving to read the worst, Mrs. Bindle turned her eyes to Bindle's cheery countenance.

"'E's bet me a quid you'll be cookin' my dinner this day week," he announced.

The effect of the announcement on Mrs. Bindle was startling. A new light sprang into her eyes, her cheeks became faintly pink as she turned to the doctor a look of interrogation.

"It's true, Mrs. Bindle, and your husband's going to lose, that is if you're careful and don't take a chill."

Within ten minutes Mrs. Bindle had fallen into a deep sleep, having first ordered Bindle to put another blanket on the bed—she was going to take no risks.

"The first time I ever knowed Mrs. B. 'ear me talk about bettin' without callin' me a 'eathen," remarked Bindle, as he saw the doctor out. "Wonders'll never cease," he murmured, as he returned to the kitchen. "One o' these days she'll be askin' me to put a shillin' on both ways. Funny things, women!"

II

Bindle's plot with the doctor did more to expedite Mrs. Bindle's recovery than all the care that had been lavished upon her. From the hour she awakened from a long and refreshing sleep, she began to manifest interest in her surroundings. Her appetite improved and her sense of smell became more acute, so that Bindle had to select for his dishes materials giving out a less pungent odour.

He took the additional precaution of doing his cooking with the window and scullery-door open to their fullest extent.

Mrs. Bindle, on her part, took pleasure in planning the meals she imagined Mrs. Coppen was cooking. She had not been told that the charwoman was in prison for assaulting a policeman with a gin bottle.

"You'll 'ave to look out now, Joe," admonished Mrs. Hearty on one occasion as she entered the kitchen and gazed down at the table upon which Bindle was gathering together materials for what he described as a "top 'ole stoo." "If Lizzie was to catch you making all this mess she——" Mrs. Hearty finished in a series of wheezes.

One evening, when Bindle's menu consisted of corned-beef, piccalilli and beer, to be followed by pancakes of his own making, the blow fell.

The corned beef, piccalilli and beer were excellent and he had enjoyed them; but the pancakes were to

be his chef d'œuvre. His main object in selecting pancakes was, as he explained to Mrs. Hearty, "that they don't stink while cookin'."

From his sister-in-law he had obtained a general idea of how to proceed. She had even gone so far as to assist in mixing the batter.

The fat was bubbling merrily in the frying-pan as he poured in sufficient liquid for at least three pancakes.

"You ain't got much to learn about cookin', old cock," he muttered, as he watched the fat bubble darkly round the cream-coloured batter.

After a lapse of some five minutes he decided that the underside was sufficiently done. Then came the problem of how to turn the pancake. He had heard that expert cooks could toss them in such a way that they fell into the pan again on the reverse side; but he was too wise to take such a risk, particularly as the upper portion of the pancake was still in a liquid state.

He determined upon more cautious means of achieving his object. With the aid of a tablespoon and a fish-slice, he managed to get the pancake reversed. It is true that it had a crumpled appearance, and a considerable portion of the loose batter had fallen on to the stove; still he regarded it as an achievement.

Just as he was contemplating the turning of the pancake on to a plate, a knock came at the front-door. On answering it, Bindle found a butcher's boy, who insisted that earlier in the day he had left a pound of beef-steak at No. 7, instead of at No. 17. The lad

was confident, and refused to accept Bindle's assurance that he had neither seen nor heard of the missing meat.

The argument waxed fierce and eventually developed into personalities, mainly from the butcher-boy.

Suddenly Bindle remembered his pancake. Banging the door in the lad's face, he dashed along the passage and opened the kitchen door. For a second he stood appalled, the pancake seemed to have eaten up every scrap of oxygen the room contained, and in its place had sent forth a suffocating smell of burning.

Realising that in swift action alone lay his salvation, Bindle dashed across the room, opened the door leading to the scullery and then the scullery door itself. He threw up the window and, with water streaming from his eyes, approached the stove. A blackened ruin was all that remained of his pancake.

Picking up the frying-pan he carried it over to the sink, where he stood regarding the charred mass. Suddenly he recollected that he had left open the kitchen-door leading into the passage. Dropping the frying-pan, he made a dash to close it ; but he was too late. There, with her shoulders encased in a red flannel petticoat, stood Mrs. Bindle.

" My Gawd ! " he muttered tragically.

For nearly a minute she stood as if turned to stone. Then without a word she closed the door behind her, walked to the centre of the room, and stood absorbing the scene of ruin and desolation about her, Bindle backing into the furthest corner.

She regarded the stove, generously flaked with the

overflow of Bindle's culinary enthusiasm, glanced up at the discoloured dish-covers over the mantel-piece, the brightness of which had always been her special pride.

On to the dresser her eye wandered, and was met by a riot of dirty dishes and plates, salmon tins, empty beer bottles, crusts of bread, reinforced by an old boot.

The kitchen-table held her attention for fully half a minute. The torn newspaper covering it was stained to every shade of black and brown and grey, the whole being composed by a large yellow splotch, where a cup of very liquid mustard had come to grief.

Upon this informal tablecloth was strewn a medley of unwashed plates, knives and forks, bread-crumbs, potato-peelings and fish-bones.

Having gazed her fill, and still ominously silent, she proceeded to make a thorough tour of inspection, Bindle watching her with distended eyes, fear clutching at his heart.

At the sink she stood for some seconds steadfastly regarding Bindle's pancake. Her lips had now entirely disappeared.

The crisis came when she opened the dresser drawer and found the pie-dish and plate he had broken, but had forgotten to take away. Screwing up the packet again, she turned swiftly and hurled it at him with all her strength.

Wholly unprepared, Bindle made a vain effort to dodge ; but the package got him on the side of the head, and a red line above his ear showed that Mrs. Bindle had drawn first blood.

"You fiend!" she cried. "Oh, you——!" and dropping into the chair by the table she collapsed.

Soon the kitchen was ringing with the sounds of her hysterical laughter. Bindle watched her like one hypnotised.

As if to save his reason, a knock came at the outer door. He side-stepped swiftly and made a dash for the door giving access to the hall. A moment later he was gazing with relief at Mrs. Hearty's pale blue tam o' shanter.

"'Ow is she, Joe?" she wheezed.

Then as he stepped aside to allow Mrs. Hearty to precede him into the kitchen, Bindle found voice. "I think she's better," he mumbled.

CHAPTER XII

MRS. BINDLE BREAKS AN ARMISTICE

I

"PLEASANT company, you are," snapped Mrs. Bindle, as she made an onslaught upon the kitchen fire, jabbing it viciously with a short steel poker.

Bindle looked up from the newspaper he was reading. It was the third attack upon the kitchen fire within the space of five minutes, and he recognised the portents—a storm was brewing.

"I might as well be on a desert island for all the company you are," she continued. "Here am I alone all day long with no one to speak to, and when you come home you just sit reading the horse-racing news in the paper."

"Wot jer like to talk about ?" he enquired, allowing the paper to drop to the floor opposite him.

She sniffed angrily and threw the poker into the ash-pan.

"I wasn't readin' about racin'," he continued pacifically. "I was jest readin' about a cove wot went orf with another cove's missis, 'is best overcoat and two chickens."

"Stop it!" She stood over him, her lips compressed, her eyes hard and steely, as if meditating violence, then, turning suddenly, she walked swiftly across to the dresser and pulled out the left-hand drawer. Taking from it her bonnet, she put it on her head and proceeded to tie the strings beneath her chin.

From behind the kitchen door she unhooked a brown mackintosh, into which she struggled.

"Goin' out?" he enquired.

"Yes," she replied, as she tore open the door, "and perhaps I'll never come back again," and with a bang that shook the house she was gone.

She took a tram to Hammersmith on her way to see her niece, Millie Dixon. She was angry; the day had been one of continual annoyances and vexations. Entering the car she buried her elbows deep into the redundant figure of a woman who was also endeavouring to enter.

Once inside, the woman began to inform the car what she thought of "scraggy 'Uns with faces like a drop of vinegar on the edge of a knife."

"That's the way you gets cancer," she continued, as she stroked the left side of her ample bust. People with elbows like that should 'ave 'em padded, and Mrs. Bindle was conscious that the car was with her antagonist.

Mrs. Bindle next proceeded to quarrel with the conductor about the fare, which had gone up a halfpenny, and she ended by threatening to report him for not setting her down between the scheduled stopping-places.

"She's lost a Bradbury and found the water-rate,"

remarked the conductor, as he turned once more to the occupants of the car after watching Mrs. Bindle alight.

The fat woman responded to the pleasantry by expressing her views on " them wot don't know 'ow to be'ave theirselves like ladies."

With Mrs. Bindle, the lure of Joseph the Second was strong within her. When her loneliness became too great for endurance, or the domestic atmosphere manifested signs of a greater voltage than the normal, her thoughts instinctively flew to the blue-eyed nephew, who slobbered and cooed at her and raised his chubby fists in meaningless gestures. Then the hunger within her would be appeased, until some chance mention of Bindle's name would awaken her self-pity.

She found Millie alone with Joseph the Second asleep in his cot beside her. As she feasted her gaze upon the eye-shut babe, Mrs. Bindle was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. She wanted to babble baby-talk, and gaze into those filmy blue eyes.

In spite of her aunt's protests, Millie made a cup of tea, explaining as she did so that Charley was staying late at the office.

" It's a good cake, Millie," said Mrs. Bindle a few minutes later, as she delicately cut another small square from the slice of home-made cake upon the plate before her. In her eyes there was a look which was a tribute from one good cook to another. " Who gave you the recipe ? "

" It was all through Uncle Joe," said Millie. " He was always saying what a wonderful cook you are,

Aunt Lizzie, and that if you didn't feed pussy he wouldn't purr," she laughed. "You know what funny things he says," she added parenthetically—"so I took lessons. You see," she added quaintly, "I wanted Charley to be very happy."

"Pretty lot of purring there is in our house," was Mrs. Bindle's grim comment, as she raised her cup-and-saucer from the table upon the finger-tips of her left hand and, with little finger awkwardly crooked, lifted the cup with her disengaged hand and proceeded to sip the tea with Victorian refinement.

"How is Uncle Joe?" asked Millie. "I wish he had come."

"Oh! don't talk to me about your uncle," cried Mrs. Bindle peevishly. "He's sitting at home smoking a filthy pipe and reading the horse-racing news. I might be dirt under his feet for all the notice he takes of me."

The grievances of the day had been cumulative with Mrs. Bindle, and the burden was too heavy to be borne in silence. Beginning with a bad tomato among the pound she had bought that morning at Mr. Hearty's Fulham shop, her troubles had piled up one upon another to the point when she found Joseph the Second asleep.

She had burned one of her best hem-stitched handkerchiefs whilst ironing it, the milk had "turned" on account of the thunder in the air and, to crown the morning's tragedies, she had burned a saucepan owing to the dustman coming at an inconvenient moment.

"He's never been a proper husband to me," she sniffed ominously.

"Dear Aunt Lizzie," said Millie gently, as she leaned forward and placed her hand upon Mrs. Bindle's arm.

"He humiliates me before other people and—and sometimes I wish I was dead, Millie, God forgive me." Her voice broke as she stifled a sob.

Millie's large, grave eyes were full of sympathy, mixed with a little wonder. She could not understand how anyone could find "Uncle Joe" other than adorable.

"Ever since I married him he's been the same," continued Mrs. Bindle, the flood-gates of self-pity opening wide under the influence of Millie's gentleness and sympathy. "He tries to make me look small before other people and—and I've always been a good wife to him."

Again she sniffed, and Millie squeezed her arm affectionately.

"He's just the same with Mr.—with your father," Mrs. Bindle corrected herself. "Why he stands it I don't know. If I was a man I'd hit him, that I would, and hard too," she added as if to allow of no doubt in her niece's mind as to the nature of the punishment she would administer. "I'd show him; but Mr. Hearty's so good and patient and gentle." Mrs. Bindle produced a handkerchief, and proceeded to dab the corners of her eyes, although there was no indication of tears.

"But, Aunt Lizzie," protested Millie gently, "I'm sure he doesn't mean to make you—to humiliate you."

She felt that loyalty to her beloved Uncle Joe demanded that she should defend him. "You see, he—he loves a joke, and he's very good to—to, oh, everybody! Charley just loves Uncle Joe," she added, as if that settled the matter as far as she were concerned.

"Look how he goes on about the chapel," continued Mrs. Bindle, fearful lest her niece's sympathy should be snatched from her. "I wonder God doesn't strike him dead. I'm sure I——"

"Strike him dead!" cried Millie in horror. "Oh, Aunt Lizzie! you don't mean that, you couldn't." She paused, seeming to bring the whole twelve months of her matronhood to the examination of the problem. "I know he's very naughty sometimes," she added sagely, "but he loves you, Aunt Lizzie. He thinks that——"

"Love!" cried Mrs. Bindle with all the scorn of a woman who has no intention of being comforted. "He loves nothing but his food and his low companions. He shames me before the neighbours, talking that familiar with common men. When I'm out with him he shouts out to bus-conductors, or whistles at policemen, or winks at—at hussies in the street." She paused in the catalogue of Bindle's crimes, whilst Millie turned her head to hide the smile she could not quite repress.

She herself had been with Bindle when he had called out to his bus-conductor friends, and whistled under his breath when passing a policeman, "If You Want to Know the Time Ask a Policeman"; but he had

never winked at girls when he had been with her ; of that she was sure.

" You see, Aunt Lizzie, he knows so many people, and they all like him and——"

" Only common people, like chauffeurs and workmen," was the retort. " When I'm out with him I sometimes want to sink through the ground with shame. He lets them call him ' Joe,' and of course they don't respect me." Again she sniffed ominously.

" I'll speak to him," said Millie with a wise little air that she had assumed since her marriage.

" Speak to him ! " cried Mrs. Bindle scornfully. " Might as well speak to a brick wall. I've spoken to him until I'm tired, and what does he do ? Laughs at me and says I'm as——" she paused, as if finding difficulty in bringing herself to give Bindle's actual expression—" says I'm as holy as ointment, if you know what that means."

" But he doesn't mean to be unkind, Aunt Lizzie, I'm sure he doesn't," protested Millie loyally. " He calls Boy—I mean Charley," she corrected herself with a little blush, " all sorts of names," and she laughed at some recollection of her own. " Don't you think, Aunt Lizzie——" she paused, conscious that she was approaching delicate ground. " Don't you think that if you and Uncle Joe were both to try and—and——" she stopped, looking across at her aunt anxiously, her lower lip indrawn and her eyes gravely wide.

" Try and what ? " demanded Mrs. Bindle, a hardness creeping into her voice at the thought that anyone

could see any mitigating circumstance in Bindle's treatment of her.

"I thought that if perhaps—I mean," hesitated Millie, "that if you both tried very hard to—to, not to hurt each other——" again she stopped.

"I'm sure I've never said anything to him that all the world might not hear," retorted Mrs. Bindle, with the unction of the righteous, "although he's always saying things to me that make me hot with shame, married woman though I am."

"But, Aunt Lizzie," persisted Millie, clasping Mrs. Bindle's arm with both hands, and looking appealingly up into her face, "won't you try, just for my sake, pleeeeeease," she coaxed.

"I've tried until I'm tired of trying," was the ungracious retort. "I moil and toil, inch and pinch, work day and night to mend his clothes and get his food ready, and this is what I get for it. He makes me a laughing-stock, talks about me behind my back. Oh, I know!" she added hastily, as Millie made a sign of dissent. "He can't deceive me. He wants to bring me down to his own level of wickedness, then he'll be happy; but he shan't," she cried, the Daughter of the Lord manifesting herself. "I'll kill myself first. He shall never have that pleasure, no one shall ever be able to say that I let him drag me down.

"I've always done my duty by him," she continued, returning to the threadbare phrase that was ever present in her mind. "I've worked morning, noon and night to try and keep him respectable, and see

how he treats me. I'm worse off than a servant, I tell him so and what does he do?" she demanded. "Laughs at me," she cried shrilly, answering her own question, "and humiliates me before the neighbours. Get's the children to call after me, makes——"

"Oh, Aunt Lizzie! You mustn't say that," cried Millie in distress. "I'm sure Uncle Joe would never do such a thing. He couldn't," she added with conviction.

"Well, they do it," retorted Mrs. Bindle, conscious of a feeling that possibly she had gone too far; "only yesterday they did it."

"What did they say?" enquired Millie curiously.

"They said," she paused as if hesitating to repeat what the youth of Fenton Street had called after her. Then, as if determined to convict Bindle of all the sins possible, she continued, "They called after me all the way up Fenton Street——" again she paused.

"Yes, Aunt Lizzie."

"They called 'Mrs. Bindle turns a spindle.'"

Millie bent quickly forward that her involuntary smile might not be detected.

"They never call out after him," Mrs. Bindle added, as if that in itself were conclusive proof of Bindle's guilt. "And now I must be going, Millie," and she rose and once more bent down to gaze where Joseph the Second slept the sleep of an easy conscience and a good digestion.

"Bless his little heart," she murmured, for the moment forgetting her own troubles in the contemplation of the sleeping babe. "I hope he

doesn't grow up like his uncle," she added, her thoughts rushing back precipitately to their customary channel.

"I'm going to have a talk with Uncle Joe," said Millie, as she followed her aunt along the passage, "and then——" she paused.

"You'd talk the hind leg off a donkey before you'd make any impression on him," was the ungracious retort. "Good night, Millie, I'm glad you're getting on with your cooking," and Mrs. Bindle passed out into the night to the solitude of her own thoughts, populated exclusively by Bindle and his shortcomings.

II

"I haven't told Charley, Uncle Joe, so be careful," whispered Millie, as Bindle hung up his hat in the hall.

"'Aven't told 'im wot, Millie?"

"That—that——" she hesitated.

"I get you Steve," he cried, with a knowing wink, "you ain't told 'im 'ow you're goin' to make yer Aunt Lizzie the silent wife of Fulham."

"Now, Uncle Joe," she admonished with pouting lips, "you promised. You will be careful, won't you?" She had spent two hours the previous night coaching Bindle in the part he was to play.

"Reg'lar dove I am to-night," he said cheerily. "I could lay an egg, only I don't know wot colour it ought to be."

Millie gazed at him for a few seconds in quizzical doubt, then, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders, and a pout that was very popular with Charley, she turned and led the way into the drawing-room.

Charley Dixon was doing his best to make conversation with his aunt-in-law; but Mrs. Bindle's monosyllabic methods proved a serious obstacle.

"Now we'll have supper," cried Millie, after Bindle had greeted Charley and gazed a little doubtfully at Mrs. Bindle. He seemed on the point of making some remark; but apparently thought better of it, instead he turned to admire an ornament on the mantelpiece. He had remembered just in time.

Millie had spread herself upon the supper. There was a small cold chicken that seemed desirous of shrinking within itself; a salad in a glass bowl, with a nickel-silver fork and spoon adorned with blue china handles; a plate of ham well garnished with parsley; a beef-steak and kidney pie, cold, also garnished with parsley; some pressed beef and tongue, of a thinness that advertised the professional hand which had cut it.

On the sideboard was an infinity of tarts, blanc-mange, stewed fruit and custard. With all the recklessness of a young housewife, Millie had prepared for four what would have been ample for fourteen.

It was this fact that first attracted Mrs. Bindle's attention. Her keen eyes missed nothing. She examined the knives and spoons, identifying them as wedding presents. She lifted the silver pepper-castor, a trifle, light as air, examined the texture of the table-cloth and felt the napkins with an appraising thumb and

forefinger, and mentally deprecated the lighting of the two pink candles, in silver candlesticks with yellow shades, in the centre of the table.

Millie fluttered about, acutely conscious of her responsibilities and flushed with anxiety.

"I hope—I hope," she began, addressing her aunt. "I—I hope you will like it."

"You must have worked very hard, Millie," said Mrs. Bindle, an unusual gentleness in her voice, whereat Millie flushed.

Bindle and Charley were soon at work upon the beefsteak and kidney pie, hot potatoes and beans. Bindle had nearly fallen at the first hurdle. In the heat of an argument with Charley as to what was the matter with the Chelsea football team, he had indiscreetly put a large piece of potato into his mouth without realising its temperature. A look of agony overspread his features. He was just in the act of making a preliminary forward motion to return the potato from whence it came, when Charley, with a presence of mind that would have brought tears to Bindle's eyes, had they not already been there, indicated the glass of beer in front of him.

With a swoop Bindle seized it, raised it to his lips, and cooled the heated tuber. Pulling his red silk handkerchief from his breast-pocket, he mopped up the tears just as Mrs. Bindle turned her gaze upon him.

"Don't make me laugh, Charley," he cried with inspiration, "or I'll choke," at which Charley laughed in a way that proved him entirely devoid of histrionic talent.

"I'll do as much for you one o' these days, Charley," Bindle whispered, looking reproachfully at the remains of the potato that had betrayed him. "My Gawd! It was 'ot," he muttered under his breath. "Look out for yourself an' 'ave beer 'andy."

He turned suddenly to Mrs. Bindle. In his heart there was an uncharitable hope that she too might be caught in the toils from which he had just escaped; but Mrs. Bindle ate like a book on etiquette. She held her knife and fork at the extreme end of the handles, her elbows pressed well into her sides, and literally toyed with her food.

After each mouthful, she raised her napkin to her lips, giving the impression that it was in constant movement, either to or from her lips.

She took no table risks. She saw to it that every piece of food was carefully attached to the fork before she raised it from the plate, and never did fork carry a lighter load than hers. After each journey, both knife and fork were laid on her plate, the napkin—Mrs. Bindle referred to it as a serviette—raised to her unsoiled lips, and she touched neither knife nor fork again until her jaws had entirely ceased working.

Between her visits to the kitchen, Millie laboured desperately to inveigle her aunt into conversation; but although Mrs. Bindle possessed much religious and domestic currency, she had no verbal small change.

During the afternoon, Millie had exhausted domesticity and herself alike—and there had been Joseph the Second. Mrs. Bindle did not read, they had no common friends, she avoided the pictures, and what

she did see in the newspapers she so disapproved of as to close that as a possible channel of conversation.

"Aunt Lizzie," cried Millie in desperation for something to say, "you aren't making a good supper."

"I'm doing very nicely, thank you, Millie," said Mrs. Bindle, who in a quarter of an hour had managed to envelop about two square inches of ham and three shreds of lettuce.

"You don't like the ham, Aunt Lizzie," protested the hospitable Millie; "have some pie."

"It's very nice, thank you, Millie," was the prim reply. "I'm enjoying it," and she proceeded to dissect a piece of lettuce to a size that even a "prunes and prisms" mouth might have taken without inconvenience.

"Charley," cried Millie presently. "I won't have you talking football with Uncle Joe. Talk to Aunt Lizzie."

A moment later she realized her mistake. Bindle returned to his plate, Charley looked at his aunt doubtfully, and conversation lay slain.

"Listen," cried Millie who, at the end of five minutes, thought she must either say something, or scream. "That's Joey, run up and see, Charley, there's a dear" —she knew it was not Joey.

Charley rose dutifully, and once more silence descended upon the table.

"Aunt Lizzie, you *are* making a poor meal," cried Millie, genuinely distressed, as Mrs. Bindle placed her knife and fork at the "all clear" angle, although she had eaten less than half what her plate contained.

"I've done very nicely, thank you, Millie, and I've enjoyed it."

Millie sighed. Her eyes wandered from the heavily-laden table to the sideboard, and she groaned in spirit. In spite of what Bindle and Charley had done, and were doing, there seemed such a lot that required to be eaten, and she wondered whether Charley would very much mind having cold meat, blancmange and jam tarts for the rest of the week.

"It wasn't him, Millie," said Charley, re-entering the room, and returning to his plate with the air of one determined to make up for the time he had lost in parental solicitude, whilst Bindle pushed his own plate from him as a sign that, so far as the first round was concerned, he had nothing more to say.

"You're very quiet to-night, Uncle Joe," said Millie, the soul of hospitality within her already weeping bitter tears.

"Me?" cried Bindle, starting and looking about him. "I ain't quiet, Millie," and then he relapsed once more into silence.

Charley did not seem to notice anything unusual. In his gentle, good-natured way he hoped that Millie would not again ask him to talk to Aunt Lizzie.

Mrs. Bindle partook, no other word adequately describes the action, of an open jam tart with the aid of a spoon and fork, from time to time sipping daintily from her glass of lemonade; but she refused all else. She had made an excellent meal, she repeatedly assured Millie, and had enjoyed it.

Millie found comfort in plying Bindle with dainties.

He had received no orders to curtail his appetite, so he had decided in his own idiom to "let 'em all come" —and they came, tarts and turnovers, fruit-salad and blancmange, custard and jelly. By the time the cheese and biscuits had arrived, he was forced to lean back in his chair and confess himself vanquished.

"Not if you was to pay me," he said, as he shook a regretful head.

After the meal, they returned to the drawing-room. Millie showed Mrs. Bindle an album of coloured post-cards they had collected during their honeymoon, whilst Charley wandered about like a restless spirit, missing his after-dinner pipe.

"Ain't we goin' to smoke?" Bindle had whispered hoarsely, as they entered the drawing-room; but Charley shook a sad and resigned head.

"She mightn't like it," he whispered back, so Bindle seated himself in the corner of a plush couch, and wondered how long it would be before Mrs. Bindle made a move to go home.

Millie was trying her utmost to make the postcards last as long as possible. Charley had paused beside her in his restless strolling about the room, and proceeded to recall unimportant happenings at the places pictured.

At length the photographs were exhausted, and both Millie and Charley began to wonder what was to take their place, when Mrs. Bindle rose, announcing that she must be going. Millie pressed her to stay, and strove to stifle the thanksgiving in her heart,

whilst Charley began to count the minutes before he would be able to "light up."

The business of parting, however, occupied time, and it was fully twenty minutes later that Bindle and Mrs. Bindle, accompanied by Charley and Millie, passed down the narrow little passage towards the hall door.

Another five minutes were occupied in remarks upon the garden and how they had enjoyed themselves —and then the final goodnights were uttered.

As his niece kissed him, Bindle muttered, "I been all right, ain't I, Millikins?" and she squeezed his arm reassuringly, at which he sighed his relief. The tortures he had suffered that evening were as nothing, provided Millie were happy.

As the hall door closed, Charley struck a match and lighted his pipe. Returning to the drawing-room, he dropped into the easiest of the uneasy chairs.

"What's the matter with Uncle Joe to-night, Millie?" he enquired, and for answer Millie threw herself upon him, wound her arms round his neck and sobbed.

"Been a pleasant evenin', Lizzie," said Bindle conversationally, as they walked towards the nearest tram-stop.

Mrs. Bindle sniffed.

"Nice young chap, Charley," he remarked a moment later. He was determined to redeem his promise to Millie.

"What was the matter with you to-night?" she demanded aggressively.

"Matter with me?" he enquired in surprise. "There ain't nothink the matter with me, Lizzie, I enjoyed myself fine."

"Yes, sitting all the evening as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth."

"But——" began Bindle.

"Oh, I know you," she interrupted. "You wanted Millie and Charley to think it's all my fault and that you're a saint. They should see you in your own home," she added.

"But I ain't said nothink," he protested.

"You aren't like that at home," she continued. "There you do nothing but blaspheme and talk lewd talk and sneer at Mr. Hearty. Oh! I can see through you," she added, "and you needn't think you deceived Millie, or Charley. They're not the fools you think them."

Bindle groaned in spirit. He had suffered acutely that evening, mentally having had to censor every sentence before uttering it.

"Then look at the way you behaved. Eating like a gormand. You made me thoroughly ashamed of you. I could see Millie watching——"

"But she was watchin' to see I 'ad enough to eat," he protested.

"Don't tell me. Any decently refined girl would be disgusted at the way you behave. Eating jam tarts with your fingers."

"But wot should I eat 'em with?"

Before she had time to reply, the tram drew up and, following her usual custom, Mrs. Bindle made a dart

for it, elbowing people right and left. She could always be trusted to make sufficient enemies in entering a vehicle to last most people for a lifetime.

"But wot should I eat 'em with?" enquired Bindle again when they were seated.

"Sssh!" she hissed, conscious that a number of people were looking at her, including several who had made acquaintance with the sharpness of her elbows.

"But if you ain't to eat jam tarts with yer fingers, 'ow are you goin' to get 'em into yer mouth?" he enquired in a hoarse whisper, which was easily heard by the greater part of the occupants of the tram. "They don't jump," he added.

A ripple of smiles broke out on the faces of most of their fellow-passengers.

"*Will* you be quiet?" hissed Mrs. Bindle.

"Mind you don't grow up like that, kid," whispered an amorous youth to a full-busted young woman, whose hand he was grasping with interlaced fingers.

Mrs. Bindle heard the remark and drew in her lips still further.

"Been gettin' yer face sticky, mate?" enquired a little man sitting next to Bindle, in a voice of sympathy.

Bindle turned and gave him a wink.

No sooner had they alighted from the tram at The King's Head, than Mrs. Bindle's restraint vanished. All the way to Fenton Street she reviled Bindle for humiliating her before other people. She gave full rein to the anger that had been simmering within her all the evening. Millie should be told of

his conduct. Charley should learn to hate him, and Little Joey to execrate the very mention of his name.

"But you shouldn't go a-jabbin' yer elbows in people's——" Bindle paused for a word sufficiently delicate for Mrs. Bindle's ears and which, at the same time, would leave no doubt as to the actual portion of the anatomy to which he referred.

"I'll jab my elbows into you, if you're not careful," was the uncompromising response. "I'm referring to the tarts."

And Bindle made a bolt for it.

"Now this all comes through tryin' to sit on a safety-valve," he muttered. "Mrs. B. 'as got to blow-orf some'ow, or she'd bust."

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. BINDLE'S DISCOVERY

I

ON Wednesday evenings, Mrs. Bindle went to chapel to engage in the weekly temperance service. As temperance meetings always engendered in Mrs. Bindle the missionary spirit, Bindle selected Wednesday for what he called his "night out."

If he got home early, it was to encounter Mrs. Bindle's prophetic views as to the hereafter of those who spent their leisure in gin-palaces.

At first Mrs. Bindle had shown her resentment by waiting up until Bindle returned; but as he made that return later each Wednesday, she had at last capitulated, and it became no longer necessary for him to walk the streets until two o'clock in the morning, in order to slip upstairs unchallenged as to where he expected to go when he died.

One Wednesday night, as he was on his way home, whistling "Bubbles" at the stretch of his powers, he observed the figure of a girl standing under a lamp-post, her head bent, her shoulders moving convulsively

"'Ullo—'ullo!" he cried. "Wot's the matter now?"

At Bindle's words she gave him a fleeting glance, then, turning once more to the business on hand, sobbed the louder.

"Wot's wrong, my dear?" Bindle enquired, regarding her with a puzzled expression. "Oo's been 'urting you?"

"I'm—I'm afraid," she sobbed.

"Afraid! There ain't nothink to be afraid of when Joe Bindle's about. Wot you afraid of?"

"I'm—I'm afraid to go home," sobbed the girl.

"Afraid to go 'ome," repeated Bindle. "Why?"

"M-m-m-m-mother."

"Wot's up with 'er? She ill?"

"She—she'll kill me."

"Ferocious ole bird," he muttered. Then to the girl, "'Ere, you didn't ought to be out at this time o' night, a young gal like you. Why, it's gettin' on for twelve. Wot's wrong with Ma?"

"She'll kill me. I darsen't go home." She looked up at Bindle, a pathetic figure, with twitching mouth and frightened eyes. Then, controlling her sobs, she told her story.

She had been to Richmond with a girl friend, and some boys had taken them for a run on their motor-cycles. One of the cycles had developed engine-trouble and, instead of being home by ten, it was half-past eleven before she got to Putney Bridge Station.

"I darsen't go home," she wailed, as she finished her story. "Mother'll kill me. She said she would last time. I know she will," and again she began to cry, this time without any effort to shield her tear-

stained face. Fear had rendered her regardless of appearances.

"'Ere, I'll take you 'ome," cried Bindle, with the air of a man who has arrived at a mighty decision. "If Mrs. B. gets to 'ear of it, there'll be an 'ell of a row though," he muttered.

The girl appeared undecided.

"You won't let her hurt me?" she asked, with the appealing look of a frightened child.

"Well, I can't start scrappin' with your ma, my dear," he said uncertainly; "but I'll do my best. My missis is a bit of a scrapper, you see, an' I've learned 'ow to 'andle 'em. Of course, if she liked 'ymns an' salmon, it'd be sort of easier," he mused, "not that there's much chance of gettin' a tin' o' salmon at this time o' night."

The girl, unaware of his habit of trading on Mrs. Bindle's fondness for tinned salmon and hymn tunes, looked at him with widened eyes.

"No," he continued, "it's got to be tack this time. 'Ere, come along, young un, we can't stay 'ere all night. Where jer live?"

She indicated with a nod the end of the street in which they stood.

"Well, 'ere goes," he cried, starting off, the girl following. As they proceeded, her steps became more and more reluctant, until at last she stopped dead.

"Wot's up now?" he enquired, looking over his shoulder.

"I darsen't go in," she said tremulously. "I d-d-darsen't."

"'Ere, come along," cried Bindle persuasively. "Your ma can't eat you. Which 'ouse is it?"

"That one." She nodded in the direction of a gate opposite a lamp-post, fear and misery in her eyes.

"Come along, my dear. I won't let 'er 'urt you," and, taking her gently by the arm, he led her towards the gate. Here, however, the girl stopped once more and clung convulsively to the railings, half-dead with fright.

Opening the gate, Bindle walked up the short tiled path and, reaching up, grasped the knocker. As he did so, the door opened with such suddenness that he lurched forward, almost into the arms of a stout woman with a fiery face and angry eyes.

From Bindle her gaze travelled to the shrinking figure clinging to the railings.

"You old villain!" she cried, in a voice hoarse with passion, making a dive at Bindle, who, dodging nimbly, took cover behind a moth-eaten evergreen in the centre of the diminutive front garden.

"You just let me catch you, keeping my gal out like this, and you old enough to be her father, too. As for you, my lady, you just wait till I get you indoors. I'll show you, coming home at this time o' night."

She made another dive at Bindle; but her bulk was against her, and he found no difficulty in evading the attack.

"What d'you mean by it?" she demanded, as she glared at him across the top of the evergreen, "and

'er not seventeen yet. For two pins I'd have you taken up."

" 'Ere, old 'ard, missis," cried Bindle, keeping a wary eye upon his antagonist. " I ain't wot you think. I'm a dove, that's wot I am, an' 'ere are you a-playin' chase-me-Charlie round this 'ere——"

" Wait till I get you," she shouted, drowning Bindle's protest. " I'll give you dove, keeping my gal out all hours. You just wait. I'll show you, or my name ain't Annie Brunger."

She made another dive at him ; but, by a swift movement, he once more placed the diminutive evergreen between them.

" Mother !—mother ! " The girl rushed forward and clung convulsively to her mother's arm. " Mother, don't ! "

" You wait, my lady," cried Mrs. Brunger, shaking off her daughter's hand. " I'll settle with you when I've finished with him, the beauty. I'll show him ! "

The front door of the house on the right slowly opened, and a curl-papered head peeped out. Two doors away on the other side a window was raised, and a man's bald head appeared. The hounds of scandal scented blood.

" Mother ! " The girl shook her mother's arm desperately. " Mother, don't ! This gentleman came home with me because I was afraid."

" What's that ? " Mrs. Brunger turned to her daughter, who stood with pleading eyes clutching her arm, her own fears momentarily forgotten.

"He saw me crying and said he'd come home with me because—— Oh, mother, don't!—don't!"

Two windows on the opposite side of the way were noisily pushed up, and heads appeared.

"'Ere, look 'ere, missis," cried Bindle, seizing his opportunity. "It's no use a-chasin' me round this 'ere gooseberry bush. I told you I ain't nø lion. I come to smooth things over. A sort o' dove, you know."

"Mother!—mother!" Again the girl clutched her mother's arm, shaking it in her excitement. "I was afraid to come home, honestly I was, and—and he saw me crying and—and said——" Sobs choked her further utterance.

"Come inside, the pair of you." Mrs. Brunger had at length become conscious of the interest of her neighbours. "Some folks never can mind their own business," she added, as a thrust at the inquisitive. Turning her back on the delinquent pair, she marched in at the door, along the short passage to the kitchen at the farther end, where the gas was burning.

Bindle followed her confidently, and stood, cap in hand, by the kitchen-table, looking about him with interest. The girl, however, remained flattened against the side of the passage, as if anxious to efface herself.

"Elsie, if you don't come in, I'll fetch you," announced the mother threateningly.

Elsie slid along the wall and round the door-post, making for the corner of the room farthest from her mother. There she stood with terrified eyes fixed upon her parent.

"Now, then, what have you two got to say for yourselves?" Mrs. Brunger looked from Bindle to her daughter, with the air of one who is quite prepared to assume the responsibilities of Providence.

"Well, it was like this 'ere," said Bindle easily. "I see 'er," he jerked his thumb in the direction of the girl, "cryin' under a lamp-post down the street, so I asks 'er wot's up."

Bindle paused, and Mrs. Brunger turned to her daughter with a look of interrogation.

"I—I——" began the girl, then she, too, stopped abruptly.

"You've been with that hussy Mabel Warnes again." There was accusation and conviction in Mrs. Brunger's tone. "Don't you deny it," she continued, although the girl made no sign of doing so. "I warned you what I'd do to you if you went out with that fast little baggage again, and I'll do it, so help me God, I will." Her voice was rising angrily.

"'Ere, look 'ere, missis——" began Bindle.

"My name's Brunger—Mrs. Brunger," she added, to prevent any possibility of misconception. "I thought I told you once."

"You did," said Bindle cheerfully. "Now, look 'ere," he continued persuasively, "we're only young once."

Mrs. Brunger snorted disdainfully; and the look she gave her daughter caused the girl to shrink closer to the wall.

"Rare cove I was for gettin' 'ome late," remarked Bindle reminiscently.

"More shame you," was the uncompromising retort.

"Shouldn't wonder if you was a bit late now an' again when you was a gal," he continued, looking up at Mrs. Brunger with critical appreciation—"or else the chaps didn't know wot was wot," he added.

"Two blacks don't make a white," was Mrs. Brunger's obscure comment.

"Yes; but a gal can't 'elp bein' pretty," continued Bindle, following the line of his reasoning. "Now, if you'd been like some ma's, no one wouldn't 'ave wanted to keep 'er out."

"Who are you getting at?" demanded Mrs. Brunger but there was no displeasure in her voice.

"It's only the pretty ones wot gets kept out late," continued Bindle imperturbably, his confidence rising at the signs of a weakening defence. "Now, with a ma like you," he paused eloquently, "it was bound to 'appen. You didn't ought to be too 'ard on the gal, although, mind you," he said, turning to the culprit, "she didn't ought to go out with gals against her ma's wishes, an' she's goin' to be a good gal in future—ain't that so, my dear?"

The girl nodded her head vigorously.

"There, you see," continued Bindle, turning once more to Mrs. Brunger, whose face was showing marked signs of relaxation. "Now, if I was a young chap again," he continued, looking from mother to daughter, "well, anythink might 'appen."

"Go on with you, do." Mrs. Brunger's good humour was returning.

"Well, I suppose I must," said Bindle, with a grin. "It's about time I was 'opping it."

His announcement seemed to arouse the girl. Hitherto she had stood a silent witness, puzzled at the strange turn events were taking; but now she realised that her protector was about to leave her to the enemy. She started forward, and clutched Bindle by the arm.

"Don't go!—oh, don't go! I——" She stopped suddenly, and looked across at her mother.

"You ain't a-goin' to be too 'ard on 'er?" said Bindle, interpreting the look.

Mrs. Brunger looked irresolute. Her anger found its source in the mother-instinct of protection rather than in bad temper. Bindle was quick to take advantage of her indecision. With inspiration he turned to the girl.

"Now, you mustn't worry yer ma, my dear. She's got quite enough to see to without bein' bothered by a pretty little 'ead like yours. Now, if she forgives you, will you promise 'er not to be late again, an' not to go with that gal wot she don't like?"

"Oh, yes, yes! I won't, mums, honestly." She looked appealingly at her mother, and saw something in her face that was reassuring, for a moment later she was clinging almost fiercely to her mother's arm.

"You must come in one Saturday evening and see my husband," said Mrs. Brunger a few minutes later, as Bindle fumbled with the latch of the hall door. "He's on *The Daily Age*, and is only home a-Saturday nights."

"Oh, do, *please*!" cried the girl, smiles having chased all but the marks of tears from her face, and Bindle promised that he would.

"Now, if Mrs. B. was to 'ear of these little goin's on," he muttered, as he walked towards Fenton Street, "there'd be an 'ell of a row. Mrs. B.'s a good woman an', bein' a good woman, she's bound to think the worst," and he swung open the gate that led to his "Little Bit of 'Eaven."

II

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Stitchley."

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Bindle. I 'ope I 'aven't come at a inconvenient time."

"No, please come in," said Mrs. Bindle, with almost geniality, as she stood aside to admit her caller, then, closing the front-door behind her, she opened that leading to the parlour.

"Will you just wait here a minute, Mrs. Stitchley, and I'll pull up the blind?" she said.

Mrs. Stitchley smirked and smiled, whilst Mrs. Bindle made her way, with amazing dexterity, through the maze of things with which the room was crammed, in the direction of the window.

A moment later, she pulled up the dark-green blind, which was always kept drawn so that the carpet might not fade, and the sunlight shuddered into the room. It revealed a grievous medley of antimacassared chairs,

stools, photograph-frames, pictures and ornaments, all of which were very dear to Mrs. Bindle's heart.

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Stitchley?" enquired Mrs. Bindle primly. Mrs. Stitchley was inveterate in her attendance at the Alton Road Chapel; Bindle had once referred to her as "a chapel 'og."

"Thank you, my dear, thank you," said Mrs. Stitchley, whose manner exuded friendliness.

She looked about her dubiously, and it was Mrs. Bindle who settled matters by indicating a chair of stamped-plush, the seat of which rose hard and high in the centre. Over the back was an ecru antimacassar, tied with a pale-blue ribbon. After a moment's hesitation, Mrs. Stitchley entrusted it with her person.

"It's a long time since I see you, Mrs. Bindle." They had met three evenings previously at chapel.

Mrs. Bindle smiled feebly. She always suspected Mrs. Stitchley of surreptitious drinking, in spite of the fact that she belonged to the chapel Temperance Society. Mrs. Stitchley's red nose, coupled with the passion she possessed for chewing cloves, had made her fellow-worshipper suspicious.

"Wot a nice room," Mrs. Stitchley looked about her appreciatively, "so genteel, and 'ow refined."

Mrs. Bindle smirked.

"I was sayin' to Stitchley only yesterday mornin' at breakfast—he was 'avin' sausages, 'e bein' so fond of 'em—'Mrs. Bindle 'as taste,' I says, '*and* refinement.'"

Mrs. Bindle, who had seated herself opposite her visitor, drew in her chin and folded her hands before

her, with the air of one who is receiving only what she knows to be her due.

There was a slight pause.

"Yes," said Mrs. Stitchley, with a sigh, "I was always one for refinement *and* respectability."

Mrs. Bindle said nothing. She was wondering why Mrs. Stitchley had called. Although she would not have put it into words, or even allow it to find form in her thoughts, she knew Mrs. Stitchley to be a woman to whom gossip was the breath of life.

"Now you're wonderin' why I've come, my dear," continued Mrs. Stitchley, who always grew more friendly as her calls lengthened, "but it's a dooty. I says to Stitchley this mornin', 'There's that poor, dear Mrs. Bindle a-livin' in innocence of the way in which she's bein' vilated.'" Mrs. Stitchley was sometimes a little loose in the way she constructed her sentences and the words she selected.

Mrs. Bindle's lips began to assume a hard line.

"I don't understand, Mrs. Stitchley," she said.

"Jest wot I says to Stitchley, 'She don't know, the poor lamb,' I says, 'ow she's bein' deceived, 'ow she's ——'" Mrs. Stitchley paused, not from any sense of the dramatic; but because of a violent hiccough that had assailed her.

"Excuse me, mum—Mrs. Bindle," she corrected herself; "but I always was a one for 'iccups, an' when it ain't 'iccups it's spasms. Stitchley was sayin' to me only yesterday, no it wasn't, it was the day before, that——"

"Won't you tell me what you were going to?" said

Mrs. Bindle. She knew of old how rambling were Mrs. Stitchley's methods of narration.

"To be sure, to be sure," and she nodded until the jet ornament in her black bonnet seemed to have become palsied. "Well, my dear, it's like this. As I was sayin' to Stitchley this mornin', 'I can't see poor Mrs. Bindle deceived by that monster.' I see through 'im that evenin', a-turnin' your 'appy party into——" she paused for a simile—"into wot 'e turned it into," she added with inspiration.

"Oh! the wickedness of this world, Mrs. Bindle. Oh! the sin and error." She cast up her bleary, watery blue eyes, and gazed at the yellow paper fly-catcher, and once more the jet ornament began to shiver.

"Please tell me what it is, Mrs. Stitchley," said Mrs. Bindle, conscious of a sense of impending disaster.

"The wicked man, the cruel, heartless creature; but they're all the same, as I tell Stitchley, and him with a wife like you, Mrs. Bindle, to carry on with a young Jezebel like that, to——"

"Carry on with a young Jezebel!"

Mrs. Bindle's whole manner had changed. Her uprightness seemed to have become emphasised, and the grim look about her mouth had hardened into one of menace. Her eyes, hard as two pieces of steel, seemed to pierce through her visitor's brain. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

Instinctively Mrs. Stitchley recoiled.

"As I says to Stitchley——" she began, when Mrs. Bindle broke in.

"Never mind Mr. Stitchley," she snapped. "Tell me what you mean."

Mrs. Stitchley looked hurt. Things were not going exactly as she had planned. In the retailing of scandal, she was an artist, and she constructed her periods with a view to their dramatic effect upon her listener.

"Yes," she continued reminiscently, "'e's been a good 'usbindt 'as Stitchley. Never no gallivanting with other females. 'E's always said: 'Matilda, my dear, there won't never be another woman for me.' His very words, Mrs. Bindle, I assure *you*," and Mrs. Stitchley preened herself like a moth-eaten peacock.

"You were saying——" began Mrs. Bindle.

"To be sure, to be sure," said Mrs. Stitchley; "but we all 'ave our crosses to bear. The Lord will give you strength, Mrs. Bindle, just as He gave me strength when Stitchley lorst 'is leg. 'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,'" she added enigmatically.

"Mrs. Stitchley," said Mrs. Bindle, rising with an air of decision, "I insist on your telling me what you mean."

"Ah! my dear," said Mrs. Stitchley, with an emotion in her voice that she usually kept for funerals, "I knew 'ow it would be. I says to Stitchley, 'Stitchley,' I says, 'that poor, dear woman will suffer. She was made for sufferin'. She's one of them gentle, tender lambs, that's trodden underfoot by the serpent's tooth of man's lust; but she will bear 'er cross.' Them was my very words, Mrs. Bindle," she added, indifferent to the mixture of metaphor.

Mrs. Bindle looked at her visitor helplessly. Her face was very white ; but she realised Mrs. Stitchley's loquacity was undammable.

" A-takin' 'ome a young gal at two o'clock in the mornin', and then bein' asked in by 'er mother—and 'er father away at 'is work every night—and 'er not mor'n seventeen, and all the neighbours with their 'eads out of the windows, and 'er a-screechin' and askin' of 'er mother not to 'it 'er, and 'er sayin' ' Wait 'till I get you, my gal,' and callin' 'im an ole villain. 'E ought to be took up. I says to Stitchley, ' Stitchley,' I says, ' that man ought to be took up, an' it's only because of Lord George that 'e ain't.' "

" What do you mean ? " Mrs. Bindle made an effort to control herself. " Who was it that took some one home at two o'clock in the morning ? "

" You poor lamb," croaked Mrs. Stitchley, gazing up at Mrs. Bindle, whose unlamblike qualities were never more marked than at that moment. " You poor lamb. You're being deceived, Mrs. Bindle, cruelly and wickedly vilated. Your 'usbindt's carrying on with a young gal wot might 'ave been 'is daughter. Oh ! the wickedness of this world, the——"

" I don't believe it."

Mrs. Stitchley started back. The words seemed almost to hit her in the face. She blinked her eyes uncertainly, as she looked at Mrs. Bindle, the embodiment of an outraged wife and a vengeful fury.

" I'm afraid I must be going, my dear," said Mrs. Stitchley ; " but I felt I ought to tell you."

"Not until you've told me everything," said Mrs. Bindle, with decision, as she moved towards the door, "and you don't leave this room until you've explained what you mean."

Mrs. Stitchley turned round in her chair as Mrs. Bindle passed across the room, surprise and fear in her eyes.

"Lord a mercy me!" she cried. "Don't ee take on like that, Mrs. Bindle. 'E ain't worth it."

Then Mrs. Bindle proceeded to make it abundantly clear to Mrs. Stitchley that she required the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, without unnecessary circumlocution, verbiage, or obscuring metaphor.

At the end of five minutes she had reduced her visitor to a state of tearful compliance.

At first her periods halted; but she soon got into her stride and swung along with obvious enjoyment.

"My sister-in-law, not as she is my sister-in-law regler, Stitchley's father 'avin' married twice, 'is second bein' a widow with five of 'er own, an' 'er not twenty-nine at the time, reckless, I calls it. As I was sayin', Mrs. Coggles, 'er name's enough to give you a pain, an' the state of 'er 'ome, my dear——" Mrs. Stitchley raised her eyes to the ceiling as if words failed her.

"Well," she continued after a momentary pause, during which Mrs. Bindle looked at her without moving a muscle, "as I was sayin', Mrs. Coggles"—she shuddered slightly as she pronounced the name—"she lives in Arloes Road, No. 9, pink tie-ups to 'er curtains she 'as, an' that flashy in 'er dress. Well, well!" she

concluded, as if Christian charity had come to her aid.

"She told me all about it. She was jest a-goin' to bed, bein' late on account of 'Ector, that's 'er seventh, ten months old an' still at the breast, disgustin' I calls it, 'avin' wot she thought was convulsions, an' 'earin' the row an' 'ubbub, she goes to the door an' sees everythink, an' that's the gospel truth, Mrs. Bindle, if I was to be struck down like Sulphira."

She then proceeded to give a highly elaborated and ornate account of Bindle's adventure of some six weeks previously. She accompanied her story with a wealth of detail, most of which was inaccurate, coupled with the assurance that the Lord and Mrs. Stitchley would undoubtedly do all in their power to help Mrs. Bindle in her hour of trial.

Finally, Mrs. Stitchley found herself walking down the little tiled path that led to the Bindles' outer gate, in her heart a sense of great injustice.

"Never so much as bite or sup," she mumbled, as she turned out of the gate, taking care to leave it open, "and me a-tellin' 'er all wot I told 'er. I've come across meanness in my time; but I never been refused a cup-o'-tea, an' me fatiguing myself something cruel to go an' tell 'er. I don't wonder he took up with that bit of a gal."

That night she confided in her husband. "Stitchley," she said, "there ain't never smoke without fire, you mark my words," and Stitchley, glancing up from his newspaper, enquired what the 'ell she was gassing about; but she made no comment beyond emphasising, once more, that he was to mark her words.

That afternoon, Mrs. Bindle worked with a vigour unusual even in her. She attacked the kitchen fire, hurled into the sink a flat-iron that had the temerity to get too hot, scrubbed boards that required no scrubbing, washed linoleum that was spotless, black-leaded where to blacklead was like painting the lily. In short, she seemed determined to exhaust her energies and her anger upon the helpless and inanimate things about her.

From time to time there burst from her closed lips a sound as of one who has difficulty in holding back her pent-up feelings.

At length, having cleaned everything that was cleanable, she prepared a cup-of-tea, which she drank standing. Then, removing her apron and taking her bonnet from the dresser-drawer, she placed it upon her head and adjusted the strings beneath her chin.

Without waiting for any other garment, she left the house and made direct for Arloes Road.

Twice she walked its length, subjecting to a careful scrutiny the house occupied by the Brungers, noting the windows with great care, and finding in them little to criticise. Then she returned to Fenton Street.

The fact of having viewed the actual scene of Bindle's perfidy seemed to corroborate Mrs. Stitchley's story. Before the storm was to be permitted to burst, however, Mrs. Bindle intended to make assurance doubly sure by, as she regarded it in her own mind, " catching him at it."

That night, she selected for her evening reading the

chapter in the Bible which tells of the plagues of Egypt. Temporarily she saw herself in the roll of an outraged Providence, whilst for the part of Pharaoh she had cast Bindle, who, unaware of his impending doom, was explaining to Ginger at The Yellow Ostrich that a bigamist ought to be let off because " 'e must be mad to 'ave done it."

III

Mrs. Bindle awaited the coming of Saturday evening with a grimness that caused Bindle more than once to regard her curiously. " There's somethink on the 'andle," he muttered prophetically; but as Mrs. Bindle made no sign and, furthermore, as she set before him his favourite dishes, he allowed speculation to become absorbed in appetite and enjoyment.

It was characteristic of Mrs. Bindle that, Bindle being more than usually under a cloud, she should take extra care in the preparation of his meals. It was her way of emphasising the difference between them; he the erring husband, she the perfect wife.

" I shan't be in to supper to-night, Lizzie," Bindle announced casually on the evening of what Mrs. Bindle had already decided was to be her day of wrath. He picked up his bowler-hat preparatory to making one of his lightning exits.

" Where are you going ? " she demanded, hoping to trap him in a lie.

" When you gets yerself up dossy an' says you're goin' to chapel," he remarked, edging towards the door, " I says nothink at all, bein' a trustin' 'usband ; so when I gets myself up ditto an' says I ain't goin' to chapel, you didn't ought to say nothink either, Mrs. B Wot's sauce for the goose is——"

" You're a bad, black-hearted man, Bindle, and you know it."

The intensity of feeling with which the words were uttered surprised him.

" Don't you think you can throw dust——" She stopped suddenly, then concluded, " You'd better be careful."

" I am, Mrs. B.," he replied cheerily, " careful *as* careful."

Bindle had fallen into a habit of " dropping in " upon the Brungers on Saturday evenings, and for this purpose he had what he described as " a wash an' brush-up." This resolved itself into an entire change of raiment, as well as the customary " rinse " at the kitchen sink. This in itself confirmed Mrs. Stitchley's story.

" Well, s'long," said Bindle, as he opened the kitchen door. " Keep the 'ome fires burnin'," and with that he was gone.

Bindle had learned from past experience that the more dramatic his exit the less likelihood there was of Mrs. Bindle scoring the final dialectical point.

This evening, however, she had other and weightier matters for thought—and action. No sooner had the kitchen door closed than, moving swiftly across to the

dresser, she pulled open a drawer, and drew out her dark brown mackintosh and bonnet. With swift, deft movements she drew on the one, and tied the strings of the other beneath her chin. Then, without waiting to look in the mirror over the mantelpiece, she passed into the passage and out of the hall door.

She was just in time to see Bindle disappear round the corner Without a moment's hesitation she followed.

Unconscious that Mrs. Bindle, like Nemesis, was dogging his steps, Bindle continued his way until finally he turned into Arloes Road. On reaching the second lamp-post he gave vent to a peculiarly shrill whistle. As he opened the gate that led to a neat little house, the front door opened, and a young girl ran down the path and clasped his arm. It was obvious that she had been listening for the signal. A moment later they entered the house together.

For a few seconds Mrs. Bindle stood at the end of the road, staring at the door that had closed behind them. Her face was white and set, and a grey line of grimness marked the spot where her lips had disappeared. She had noted that the girl was pretty, with fair hair that clung about her head in wanton little tendrils and, furthermore, that it was bound with a broad band of light green ribbon.

"The villain!" she muttered between set teeth, as she turned and proceeded to retrace her steps. "I'll show him."

Arrived back at Fenton Street, she went straight upstairs and proceeded to make an elaborate toilet.

A little more than an hour later the front door once more closed behind her, and Mrs. Bindle proceeded upon her way, buttoning her painfully tight gloves, conscious that sartorially she was a triumph of completeness

IV

"An' 'as 'er Nibs been a good gal all the week?" Bindle paused in the act of raising a glass of ale to his lips.

"I have, mums, haven't I?" Elsie Brunger broke in, without giving her mother a chance to reply.

Mrs. Brunger nodded. The question had caught her at a moment when her mouth was overfull of fried plaice and potatoes.

"That's the ticket," said Bindle approvingly. "No bein' out late an' gettin' 'ome with the milk, or"—he paused impressively—"I gets another gal, see?"

By this time Mrs. Brunger had reduced the plaice and potatoes to conversational proportions.

"She's been helping me a lot in the house, too," she said from above a white silk blouse that seemed determined to show how much there really was of Mrs. Brunger.

Elsie looked triumphantly across the supper-table at Bindle.

"That's a good gal," said Bindle approvingly.

"You've done her a lot of good, Mr. Bindle," said Mrs. Brunger, "and me and George are grateful, ain't we, George?"

Mr. Brunger, a heavy-faced man with sad, lustreless eyes and a sallow skin, nodded. He was a man to whom speech came with difficulty, but on this occasion his utterance was constricted by a fish-bone lodged somewhere in the neighbourhood of the root of his tongue.

"Wonderful 'ow all the gals take to me," remarked Bindle. "Chase me round gooseberry bushes, they do; anythink to get me."

"You go on with you, do," laughed Mrs. Brunger. "How was I to know?"

"I said I was a dove. You 'eard me, didn't you, Fluffy?" he demanded, turning to Elsie.

"I won't be called Fluffy," she cried, in mock indignation. "You know I don't like it."

"The man who goes about doin' wot a woman says she likes ain't goin' to get much jam," remarked Bindle oracularly.

"Now, let's get cleared away, mother," remarked Mr. Brunger, speaking for the first time.

"Oh, dad! don't you love your dominoes?" cried Elsie, jumping up and giving him a hug. "All right, mums and I will soon sound the 'All clear.' Come along, uncle, you butle." This to Bindle.

Amidst much chatter and laughter the table was cleared, the red cloth spread in place of the white, and the domino-box reached down from the kitchen

mantelpiece. The serious business of the evening had begun.

Mr. Brunger had only one evening a week at home, and this he liked to divide between his family and his favourite game, giving the major part of his attention to the game.

At one time he had been in the habit of asking in some friend or acquaintance to join him; but, since the arrival of Bindle, it had become an understood thing that the same quartette should meet each Saturday evening.

Mrs. Brunger would make a pretence of crocheting. The product possessed one thing in common with the weaving of Penelope, in that it never seemed to make any appreciable progress towards completion.

Mr. Brunger devoted himself to the rigours of the game, and Elsie would flutter between the two players, bursting, but never daring, to give the advice that her superior knowledge made valuable.

Bindle kept the party amused, that is, except Mr. Brunger, who was too wrapped up in the bone parallelograms before him to be conscious of anything else.

Elsie would as soon have thought of missing her Sunday dinner as those Saturday evenings, and Mrs Brunger soon found that a new and powerful weapon had been thrust into her hand.

"Very well, you go to bed at seven on Saturday," she would say, which was inevitably followed by an "Oh, mums!" of contrition and docility.

"Out! You're beaten, uncle," cried Elsie, clapping

her hands, and enjoying the look of mock mortification with which Bindle regarded the dominoes before him.

Mr. Brunger leaned back in his chair, an expression of mild triumph modifying his heavily-jowled countenance. It was remarkable how consistently Mr. Brunger was victor.

At that moment a loud and peremptory rat-tat-tat sounded down the passage.

"Now, I wonder who that is." Mrs. Brunger put down her crochet upon the table and rose.

"Don't you bring anyone in here, mother," ordered Mr. Brunger, fearful that his evening was to be spoiled, as he began to mix the dominoes. There was no music so dear to his soul as their click-clack, as they brushed shoulders with one another.

Mrs. Brunger left the room and, carefully closing the door behind her, passed along the short passage and opened the door.

"I've come for my husband!"

On the door-step stood Mrs. Bindle, grim as Fate. Her face was white, her eyes hard, and her mouth little more than indicated by a line of shadow between her closely pressed lips. The words seemed to strike Mrs. Brunger dumb.

"Your—your husband?" she repeated at length.

"Yes, my 'usband." Mrs. Bindle's diction was losing its purity and precision under the stress of great emotion. "I know 'e's here. Don't you deny it. I saw 'im come. Oh, you wicked woman!"

Mrs. Brunger blinked in her bewilderment. She was taken by surprise at the suddenness of the assault;

but her temper was rising under this insulting and unprovoked attack.

"What's that you call me?" she demanded.

"Taking a woman's lawful wedded 'usband——" began Mrs. Bindle, when she was interrupted by Mrs. Brunger.

"Here, come in," she cried, mindful that inside the house only those on either side could hear, whereas on the door-step their conversation would be the property of the whole street.

Mrs. Bindle followed Mrs. Brunger into the parlour For a moment the two women were silent, whilst Mrs. Brunger found the matches, lighted the gas, and lowered the blind.

"Now, what's the matter with you? What's your trouble?" demanded Mrs. Brunger, with suppressed passion. "Out with it."

"I want my 'usband," repeated Mrs. Bindle, a little taken aback by the fierceness of the onslaught.

"An' what have I got to do with your husband, I should like to know?"

"He's here. You're encouraging him, leading him away from——" Mrs. Bindle paused.

"Leadin' him away from what?" demanded Mrs. Brunger.

"From me!"

"Leadin' him away, am I?—leadin' him away, I think you said?" Mrs. Brunger placed a hand on either hip and thrust her face forward, causing Mrs. Bindle involuntarily to start back.

"Oh! you needn't be afraid. I'm not goin' to hit

you. Leadin' him away was what you said." Mrs. Brunger paused dramatically, and leaned back slightly, as if to get a more comprehensive view of her antagonist. "Well, he must be a pretty damn short-sighted fool to want leadin' away from a thing like you. I'd run hell-hard if I was him."

The biting scorn of the words, the insultingly contemptuous tone in which they were uttered, for a moment seemed to daze Mrs. Bindle; but only for a breathing space.

Making a swift recovery, she turned upon her antagonist a stream of accusation and reproach.

She told how a fellow-worshipper at the Alton Road Chapel had witnessed the return of Bindle the night of the altercation in the front garden. She accused mother and daughter of unthinkable crimes, bringing Scriptural quotation to her aid

She confused Fulham and Hammersmith with Sodom and Gomorrah. She called upon an all-seeing Providence to purge the district in general, and Arloes Road in particular, of its pestilential populace.

She traced the descent of Mrs. Brunger down generations of infamy and sin. She threatened her with punishment in this world and the next. She told of Bindle's neglect and wickedness, and cast him out into the tooth-gnashing darkness. She trampled him under foot, arranged that Providence should spurn him and his associates, and consign them all to eternal and fiery damnation.

Gradually she worked herself up into a frenzy of hysterical invective. Little points of foam formed at

the corners of her mouth. Her bonnet had slipped off backwards, and hung by its strings round her neck. Her right-hand glove of biscuit brown had split across the palm.

Mrs. Bindle had lost all control of herself.

"He's here! He's here! I saw him come! You Jezebel! You're hiding him; but I'll find him. I'll find him. You—you——"

With a wild, hysterical scream, she darted to the door, tore it open, dashed along the passage, and burst into the kitchen.

"So I've caught you with the Jez——" She stopped as if petrified.

Mr. Brunger had just played his last domino, and was sitting back in his chair in triumph. Elsie, one arm round her father's neck, was laughing derisively at Bindle, who sat gazing with comical concern at five dominoes standing on their sides facing him.

All three heads jerked round, and three pairs of widened eyes gazed at the dishevelled, white-faced figure, standing looking down at them with the light of madness in its eyes.

"Oo-er!" gasped Elsie, as her arms tightened round her father's neck, almost strangling him.

"Grrrrmp," choked Mr. Brunger, dropping his pipe on to his knees.

Bindle started up, overturning his chair in the movement. His eyes were blazing, his lips were set in a firm line, and his hands were clenched convulsively at his sides.

"You—you get out of 'ere!" the words seemed to burst from him involuntarily, "or——"

For one bewildered moment, Mrs. Bindle stared at him, in her eyes a look in which surprise and fear seemed to strive for mastery. Her gaze wandered on to the frightened girl clutching her father round the neck, and then back to Bindle. She turned as suddenly as she had entered, cannoned off Mrs. Brunger, who stood behind her, and stumbled blindly along the passage out into the street.

Mrs. Brunger followed, and closed the front-door behind her. When she returned to the kitchen, Bindle had picked up his chair and resumed his seat. His hands were trembling slightly, and he was very white.

"She—she ain't been well lately," he muttered huskily. "I——"

"Now, mother, where's the beer? I'm feeling a bit thirsty;" and after this unusually lengthy speech, Mr. Brunger proceeded to shuffle the dominoes with an almost alarming vigour, whilst Elsie, wonder-eyed and a little pale, sat on the arm of her father's chair glancing covertly at Bindle.

That night, when he returned home, Bindle found laid out on the kitchen table, a bottle of beer, a glass, two pieces of bread and butter, a piece of cheese and a small dish of pickled onions.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he muttered, at the sight of this unusual attention. "Wonders'll never cease," and he proceeded to unscrew the stopper of the beer-bottle.

The incident of the Brungers was never subsequently

referred to between them; but Mrs. Bindle gave herself no rest until she had unmasked the cause of all the trouble.

Mrs. Stitchley was persuaded to see the reason why she should withdraw from the Alton Road Chapel Temperance Society, the reason being a half-quartern bottle of gin, from which she was caught imbibing at a magic-lantern entertainment,—and it was Mrs. Bindle who caught her.

THE END

ADVICE

IF you have enjoyed Mrs. Bindle you should read the three other volumes in which the further exploits of Joseph Bindle are narrated, viz.:

BINDLE
THE NIGHT CLUB
ADVENTURES OF BINDLE

In them appear most of the same characters—Mrs. Bindle, Mr. and Mrs. Hearty, Millie, Ginger, 'Guggers,' Mr. Sopley, etc. This author's latest books are

JOHN DENE OF TORONTO
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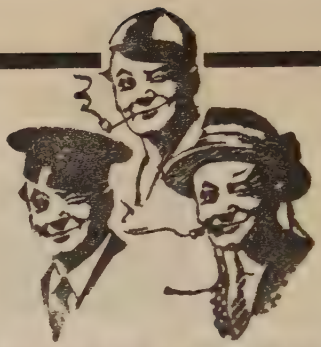

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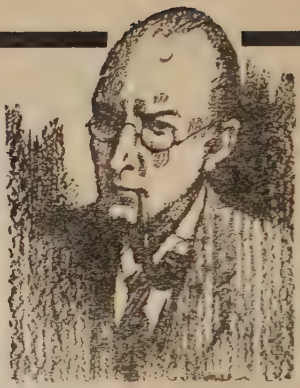

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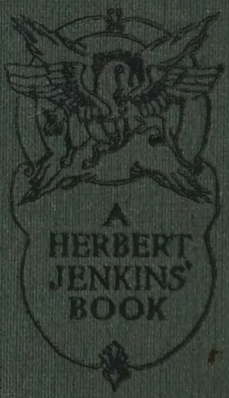
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